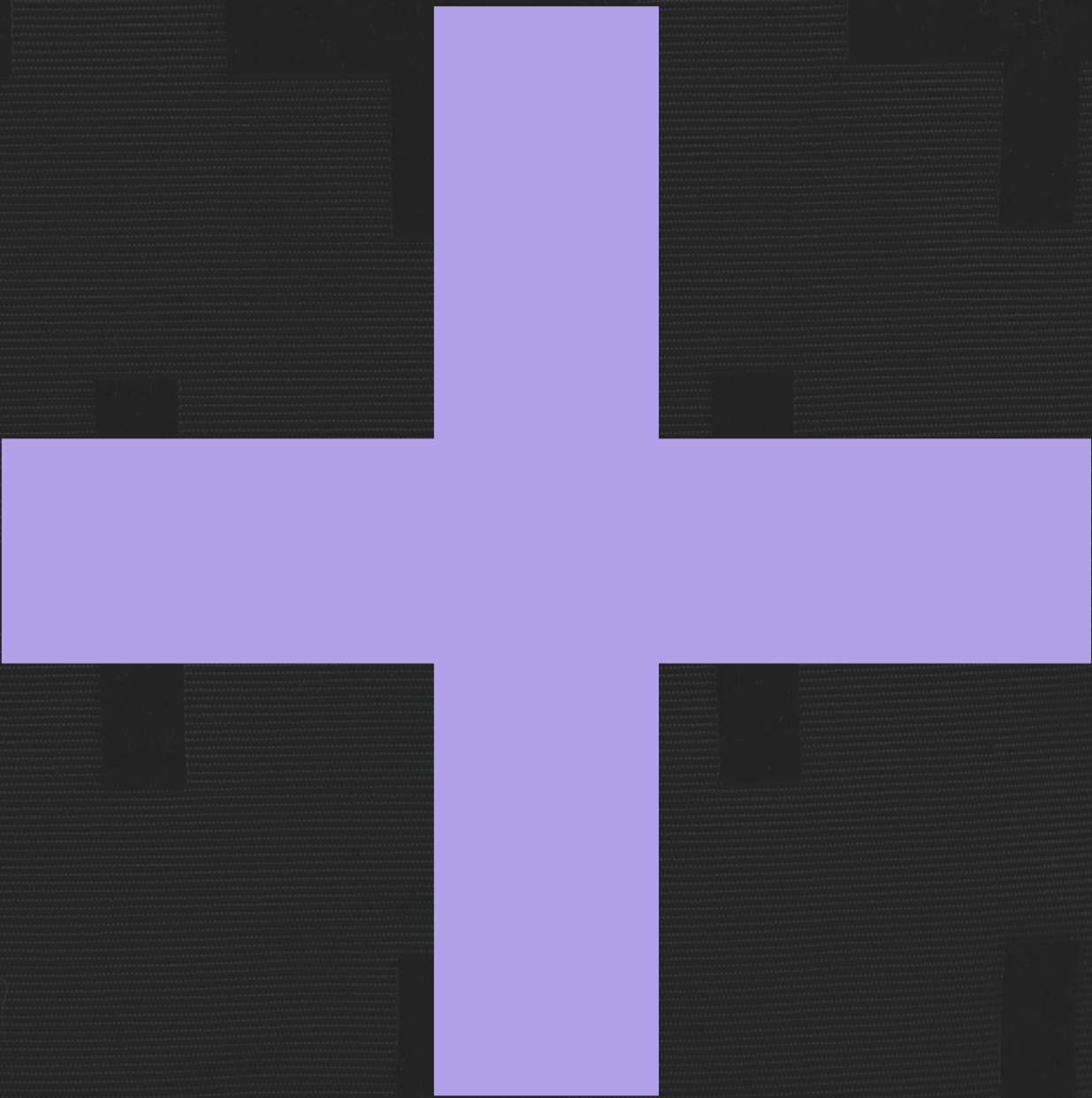
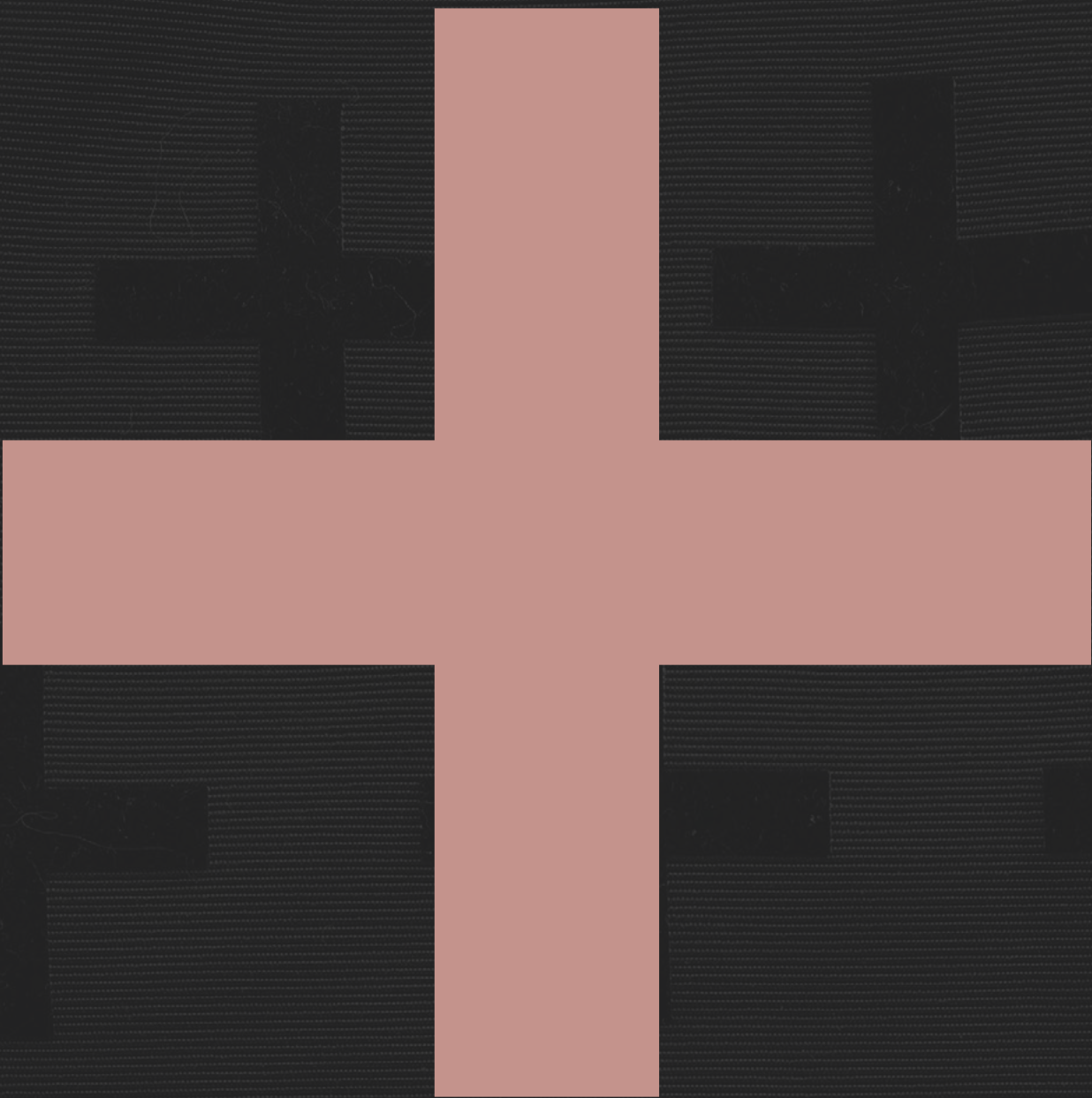


Contemplating Fashion:

Artistic Research
in Fashion
Design



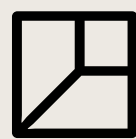


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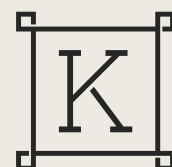
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in Fashion
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Vilnius
Academy
of Arts



ASP Łódź



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Contemplating Fashion: Artistic Research in Fashion Design

Edited by **Prof. Dr. Renata Maldutienė**, **Dr. Michał Szulc**, **Agnetė Voverė**

Reviewed by **Dr. Marius Iršėnas** and **Prof. Dr. habil. Dorota Sak**

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Contemplating Fashion:

Artistic Research
in Fashion
Design



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of Arts



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COUNCIL FOR
CULTURE

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List Of Project Exhibitions

Preface

Writing on behalf of the editorial and creative team,

Renata Maldutienė

This publication brings together the voices of fashion designers, educators, and researchers whose texts form an integral part of ongoing artistic research. The title *Contemplating Fashion* signals a conscious intention to slow down the accelerated rhythm of fashion. Here, fashion is understood not merely as a system of creative and commercial circulation, but as a critical lens through which to reconsider contemporary social, cultural, and spiritual transformations.

The publication was inspired by a desire to give greater visibility to artistic research in fashion design. It forms part of the international project *Costume & Contemplation*, initiated in 2022. The most recent phase of this project was the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, first presented at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź and later shown at the Vilnius Academy of Arts Gallery Titanikas and Panemunė Castle. The exhibition explored the individual's relationship with transcendent reality: personal experiences of faith embodied in fashion objects revealed the delicate dialogue between sacrum and profanum. This publication continues the reflections that emerged from those encounters, extending them into a broader academic and creative field.

The publication opens with contributions from art historians and cultural researchers who examine the current state of fashion and its intersections with religion. These insights situate the project within wider cultural contexts. The main body of the publication consists of texts by designer-researchers, accompanied by photographs documenting the outcomes of their creative practice. Representing different art institutions and drawing on experience within the international fashion industry, the authors offer diverse perspectives on how fashion can be understood and interpreted. By bringing these voices together in a single volume, we aim to strengthen fashion research as an equal partner in both artistic and academic dialogue.

The preparation of this publication was made possible through the collaboration of many individuals and institutions. On behalf of the editors, we extend our sincere gratitude to all the authors (Tojana Račiūnaitė, Deimantė Bulbenkaitė, Deima Katinaitė, Rita Mikučionytė, Evelina Dragūnienė & Edita Tamošiūnienė, Adrianna Grudzińska-Pham, Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, Anna Kuźmitowicz, Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauškė, Magdalena Samborska, Justina Semčenkaitė, Alevtina Ščepanova & Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė, Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė, Sonja Šterman, Jolanta Talaikytė, Justė Tarvydė, Maria Wiatrowska) who, despite the challenges of recent years, found the time to reflect on their practice and share the results of their research.

We also extend our gratitude to the graphic designer Jurga Rakauskaitė-Larkin for her creative contribution to the visual identity of this book, and to the photographers Vaiva Abromaitytė, Rusnė Šimulynaitė, Jarek Darnowski, and Adomas Brazdilis for the moments they captured. We thank Evelina Dragūnienė for the post-production of the photographs. We are likewise grateful to the reviewers Marius Iršėnas and Dorota Sak, whose insightful comments strengthened the academic structure of the publication, as well as to the many others who contributed.

We owe special thanks to the institutions that supported the realisation of this project: the Vilnius Academy of Arts, the Academy of Fine Art in Łódź, and the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, and to their leadership — Ieva Skaurone, Przemysław Wachowski, and Aneta Dalbiak. Finally, we are deeply grateful to the Lithuanian Council for Culture for its financial support—without which this publication would not have been possible.

Foreword

Director of the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź,

Aneta Dalbiak

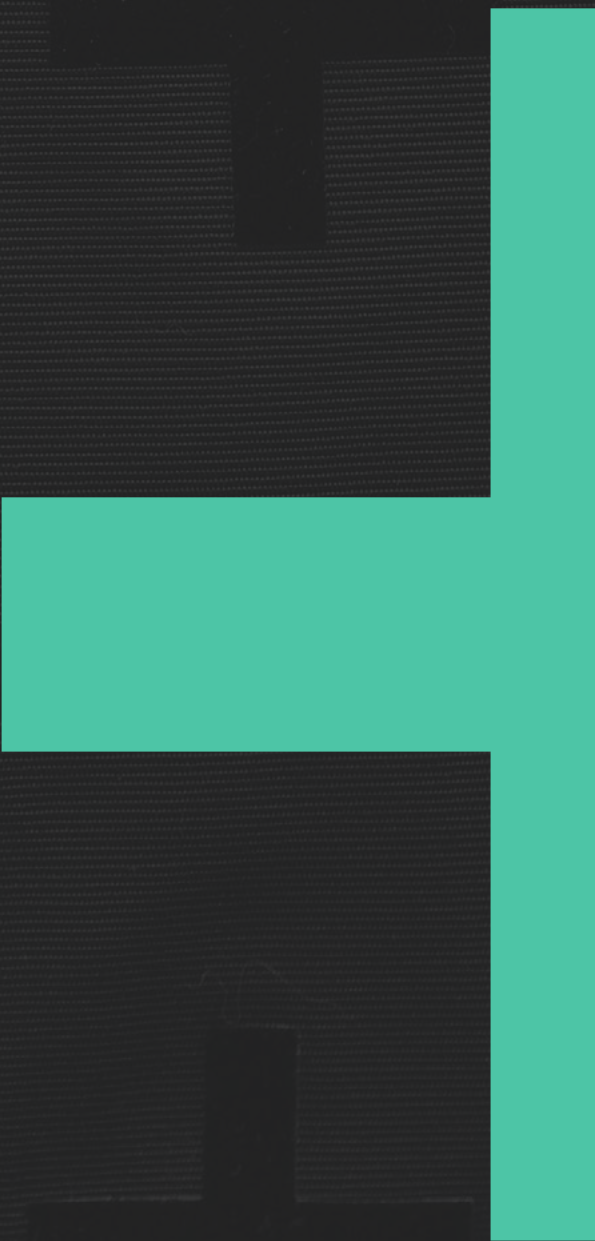
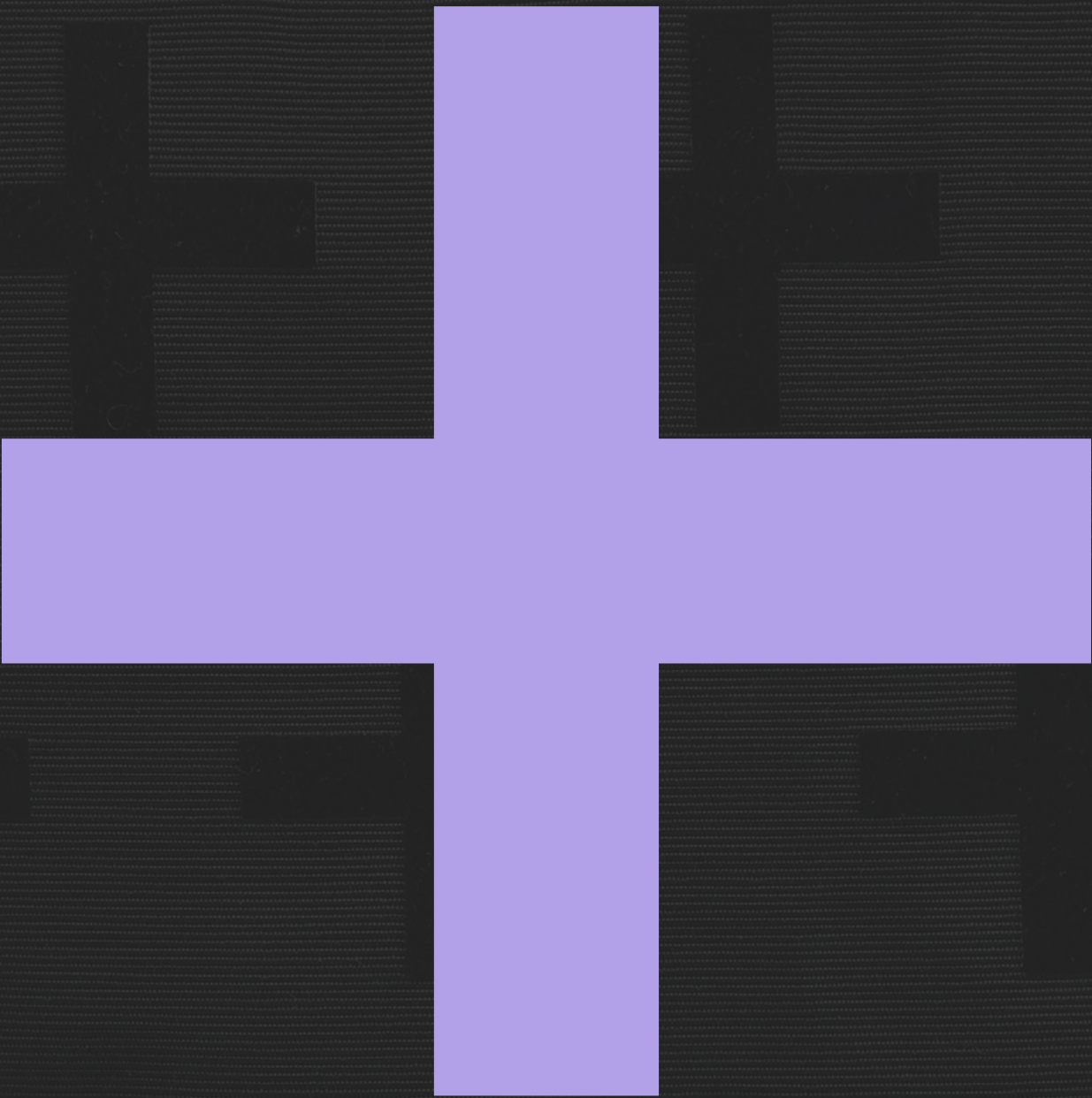
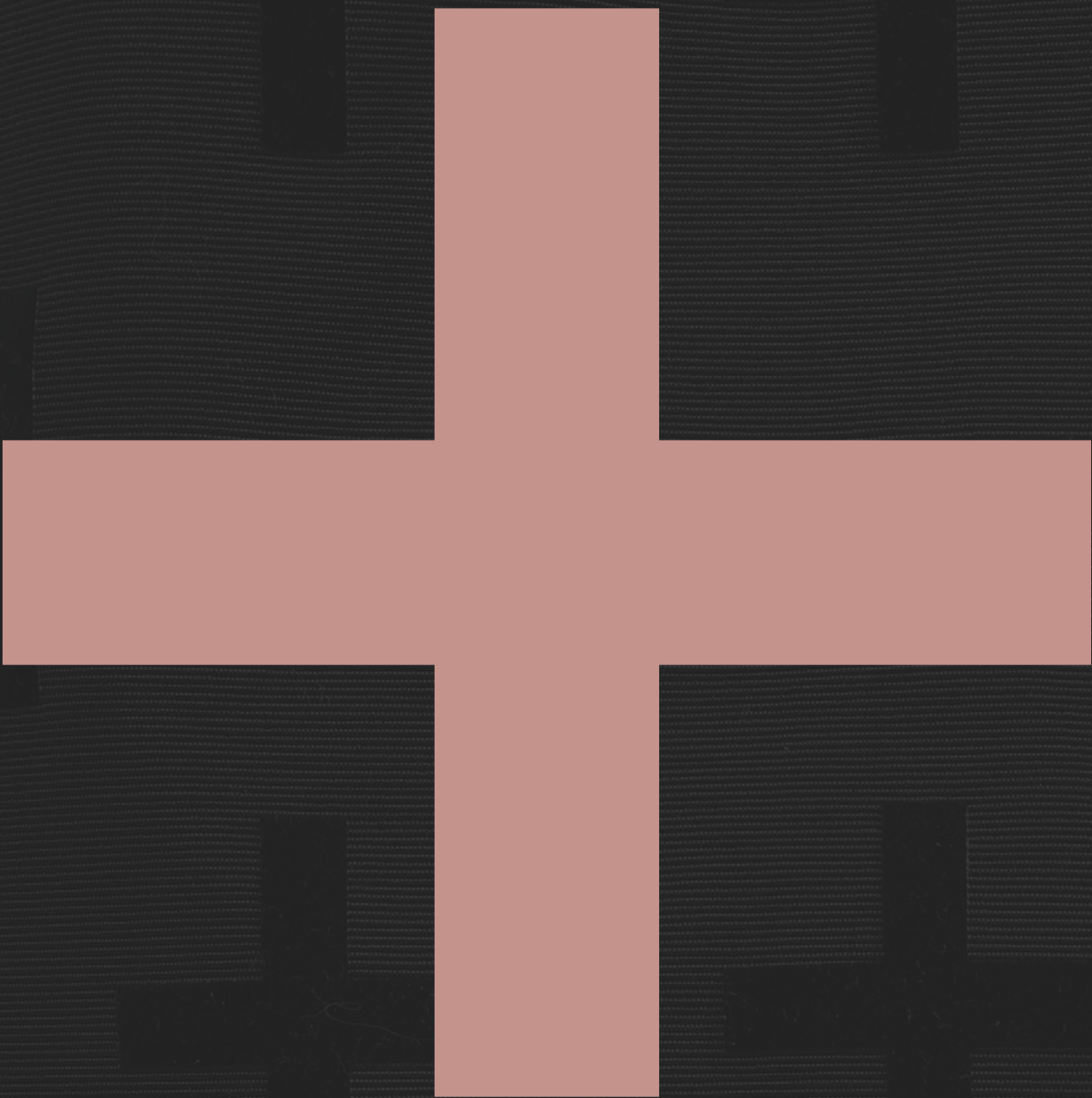
As contemporary fashion increasingly takes on an autobiographical dimension, it becomes a field for deeper reflection on the human being, their relationships with the world, and often also on fundamental existential questions. Conceived in the spirit of such considerations was the Costumes & Contemplation project, which examines how fashion design can become a practice of inner contemplation and an expression of spiritual experience. The second edition of the project was presented at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź in March and April 2024.

Titled Costumes & Contemplation on Religion, the exhibition curated by Prof Dr. Renata Maldutienė, Agnetė Voverė, and Dr. Michał Szulc sought to explore the relationship between clothing, individual identity, and the inner world. Fashion, understood as a cultural phenomenon, thus became a medium for dialogue between the sacred and the profane, between spiritual experience and corporeality, and between personal sensitivity and collective tradition. The works presented by designers representing the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, the Vilnius Academy of Arts, and the University of Maribor engendered reflection on how signals embedded in the material, cut, and form of a garment can become carriers of questions about the meaning of existence, identity, community, and transcendence. "Fashion," a conscious creative practice, revealed its potential to be a form of philosophical and spiritual contemplation.

Having such a perspective, the project might also be considered within the broader context of research into the materiality of religion, into how beliefs and spiritual experiences manifest themselves in real, tangible forms—textiles, architecture, images, sounds, and rituals—which do not merely “illustrate” religious content but actively co-create spiritual experience, making it accessible to the senses and to collective, social experience. In contrast to conventional forms of iconographic or liturgical aesthetics, clothing may function as a symbolic gesture that accommodates personal narratives, reinterpretations of meaning, and conscious artistic expression. In this way, fashion design becomes a practice that can not only reflect spiritual tensions and quests, but also initiate and intensify them. Moreover, the relationship between fabric and body becomes a space in which hidden hierarchies, social codes, and spiritual longings of contemporary communities are revealed.

In this context, particular significance is attributed to fabric itself as the fundamental material of clothing, which for centuries has been an integral element of religious rites and rites of passage. In many religious traditions, fabric serves as a means of separating the sphere of the sacred from that of the profane: it veils, protects, and consecrates the body, while at the same time organizing the space of ritual. Liturgical vestments, veils, shrouds, and prayer belts function as material carriers of theological and cosmological meaning, embedding individual experience within the framework of a communal symbolic order. Their presence in religious practices also emphasizes the temporal nature of spirituality—fabric wears out, ages, and is subject to gestures of donning and removal, becoming a testimony to the repetitiveness of ritual and the continuity of tradition. In this sense, reflection on fabric as a medium of spiritual experience also falls within the scope of research on the materiality of religion, demonstrating that what is immaterial manifests itself through concrete, corporeal, and sensually experienced forms.

For the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, these perspectives are of particular significance, as they align with one of the institution’s main areas of interest: the analysis of contemporary fashion as a language that both describes and shapes cultural and social processes. An in-depth reflection on dress in the context of religious experience has enabled the Museum to broaden its interpretative framework to include themes that had hitherto been addressed with less frequency, such as spirituality, identity and ritual, while remaining closely connected to its primary medium: textile.





Perspectives from Art and Culture Researchers

When garments recall prayers

Costumes can reflect the wearer's adherence to a religious tradition and the community of believers that upholds and lives according to its rules. For instance, a long brown tunic tied with a rope and simple sandal footwear evokes the Franciscan order established by St Francis and existing for centuries, its devotional practices and way of life. Specific garments are created not only to express belonging to a particular religious-social group, but also for participation in specific religious ceremonies or rites with their own scenarios. In such cases, the nature and meaning of the ceremony determine the nature of the clothing and its symbolically eloquent expression. A baptismal garment, for instance, is typically white, intended to convey the pure soul of a Christian renouncing the evil spirit and original sin... As centuries or even millennia ago, clothing today can embody a conscious declaration of religious identity of its creator or commissioner, and in some cases, a sincere search for such identity. However, from the 20th century onwards, especially with the rise of postmodernism and pop culture, fashion has mostly used religious motifs not to declare religious identity but rather to question it, to critically rethink it, or simply to use it as visually suggestive and striking material that has lost its semantic weight. The exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, accompanied by the texts and images of this publication, partly confirms this, yet simultaneously allows us to experience how contemporary fashion not only reflects on the influence of traditional religions on costume history, but also uses the very phenomenon of religiosity as a source inspiring various costume design solutions. In the text you are now reading, I do not intend to systematically discuss all the works in the aforementioned exhibition, much less unravel the complex and multifaceted interaction between contemporary fashion design and religious tradition. Instead, I offer several personal insights on the theme of religion and costume design, encouraged by Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who in his book *Credere di credere* speaks about religion in the first person, arguing: 'If it [i.e. narrative about religion – TR] is not purely a scholarly study based on historical documents, it cannot be expressed otherwise.'¹

¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Tikėti, kad tiki*, translated from Italian by Rita Šerpytė, Dialogo kultūros institutas, 2009, p. 121.

Head Coverings and Canons

This summer I visited Istanbul. Before entering any mosque, I had to remove my shoes and cover my head. By doing this, each time I entered the sanctuary, I transformed my appearance, adapting to the norms. By removing my sandals and covering my head with a shawl, I expressed obedience to the order, consent to tradition, and respect for a religious system I do not practise and barely know. With bare feet, I would feel various, though usually soft, carpet textures. I would constantly adjust the silk shawl hastily tied on, which would begin to slip from my hair the moment I raised my head towards the vaults decorated with ornaments and calligraphic inscriptions. I would think to myself how fortunate that I had brought a shawl to Turkey, because otherwise I would have to wear the tunic-with-hood uniform distributed to tourists at mosques... Such temporary updating of the dress—the improvised creation of a new, appropriate costume for visiting the sanctuary—neither expresses nor declares my religious beliefs, but is a necessary sign of adaptation and reconciliation with the rules of local religious culture. Paradoxically, however, this costume and the circumstances of its wearing can be interpreted as a tourist/occasional profanation of women's clothing and behaviour in the mosque. Nevertheless, this performative alteration of one's dress image inevitably participates in the *sacrum* sphere: by removing one's shoes and covering one's head, one not only reconciles oneself with the general, universally accepted and practiced requirement for entering the mosque, but can also feel oneself part of the holy place, its distinctively organised spatial organism. It is precisely such 'preparation', the *ad hoc* creation of a costume intended for a sacred place, that allows one to be there and to walk about, to look and admire, and also to sit by some column and pray, if one knows how, or to observe and mentally categorise others, the true members of the religious community and merely curious tourist intruders, like myself. This is the first example that comes to mind when considering the relationship between personal clothing and religious identity. It illustrates occasional and simultaneously performative obedience to religious tradition, its rule or canon, whilst confirming that clothing is not merely a bodily covering; it can determine a certain presence in space, prescribe movement trajectories and gestures, for instance, the involuntary touching of one's head to adjust a shawl or the repose of unconstrained feet, 'liberated' from shoes.

Clothing and its elements (such as pendants, belts, etc.) express not only solidarity but also unconditional, often eternal, oath-guaranteed belonging to one or another religious community. Costume can also clearly define a person's role, duties, and place within the religious system. For instance, in the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, clothing clearly distinguishes priests, bishops, and other figures; no one may wear the same vestments as the head of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope. The canon of garment formed by religious tradition is distinctively reflected in certain works in the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*. Michał Szulc's *UNIO 2* echoes the tradition, still alive today, in women's religious orders of covering heads with special caps called coifs. The artist cites in his work's description the rule of the Poor Clares: 'Let their heads be covered with plain linen, so that the forehead, cheeks and neck are covered, as befits modest and religious persons.' The attire of the regulated nuns had deep traditions, expressing asceticism and renunciation of the world, however, the artist takes this tradition to the extremes: he proposes covering not only the forehead and cheeks but also the eyes and mouth, thus creating not only a head covering but a face covering—a metaphor resembling a sculptural image of blind and mute existence in this worldly realm.

Maria Wiatrowska also improvises upon the theme of nuns' clothing in her work *Submission*. The artist presents an abstracted and distinctively transformed canon of monastic garments supplemented with liturgical textile forms and elements: to a black crêpe dress, she adds a triangular cap whose cut echoes the mitre—a bishop's headdress—and enlivens the textural 'dialogue' of black fabrics with an eccentric accessory of a gold glove inscribed with Gothic lettering reading 'redisare'. This is not only a replica of a canonical garment, not only an ironic play with the rules and elements of ecclesiastical costume, but also a materially articulated and embodied paradoxical union of luxury and asceticism, splendour and restraint.

Dresses for Sacred Occasions

The works by Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauškė and Sonja Šterman reminded me of another summer of mine. Many years ago, when I was preparing to receive the First Communion. My grandmother Liudvika, incidentally a seamstress-cutter, who lived in the Žirmūnai district, was preparing me to become a member of the church. I remember how, as the sun was blazing, I was hopping from one chalk-marked pavement tile to another (most likely playing hopscotch), and reciting from memory 'I believe in God the Father...'—the longest of the three principal prayers obligatory to know along with the Ten Commandments... My seven-year-old self was a mixture of boredom and duty, heaviness and excitement as the special event approached, and the knowledge that a white guipure dress was waiting for me in the wardrobe kept flashing in my head. That garment, intended for the First Communion—my first conscious personal religious ceremony (as I do not remember my baptism)—with its multi-layered skirt and collar embroidered with mother-of-pearl beads, became the main stimulus for my catechism studies. The rustling snow-white lace fabrics were equal to absolute, unquestionable beauty, embodied 'divinity', a visible and tangible grace that I could earn only by preparing accordingly, by learning everything. After the exam in the sacristy of Vilnius St Raphael's Church, together with other children, I received the sacrament of First Communion at the main altar, most likely during the solemn Holy Mass of Pentecost. After that, my church dress hung in the wardrobe again, and seemed to be waiting for something. Sometimes I would find it to have a look, only it no longer shone so brightly, and gradually 'shrank' and turned grey, resembling an archival document.

Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikaluskė's dress resembles a document, though it appears not to have lost its original whiteness and lustre. In the work *Love Is Patient, Love Is Kind*, the artist exhibits the dress she herself created and wore during the wedding sacrament ceremony. The power of white pure splendour and the longing for sanctity embedded in the tradition of white dresses is also expressed by Sonja Šterman's *Light*. The layered combinations of silk, cotton and viscose lace, 'resurrected' from the past, become contemporary through the meditation of meticulous handwork, through the carefully and precisely stitched reverence for otherworldly light. A special white dress is also present in Anna Kuźmitowicz's work *Rusznik II*. Modern and extravagant in silhouette, formed from a single, specifically interwoven fabric band, it distinctively actualises the towel used in Ukrainian religious rites, called 'rusznik'. Important to the artist's conception is that this type of cloth traditionally decorated the altar corners in Ukrainian village homes, covered icons, swaddled baptised infants, and shrouded the deceased. Her 'rusznik' seems to unite all the celebrated and sanctified occasions of human life, fateful events, and protective rituals. Thus, the artist, employing the towel motif as the principal and sole element of her dress, interprets it as marking beginning and end, as a universal fabric band intended for both man and God, in which the human body is wrapped, bound, covered and protected.

Body Memory and Gardens

One does not wish to think about what happens to our bodies when they lose life, one does not wish to imagine how they decay and transform... Yet one wishes to believe that ultimately they will bloom into gardens.

In early childhood, I thought that flowers were planted on graves precisely so that the deceased could feed on sweet pollen, much like bees... Now I no longer think that, of course, but based on my academic experience, I can state that trees, shrubs, flowers, and generally blooming, fruit-bearing, and flourishing vegetation, as well as correspondingly organised places or gardens, have traditionally accompanied many imaginings and contemplations of life after death. It is no accident that the garden theme is recognisable in several works in the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*. Dorota Sak presents a dress and coat ensemble-installation titled *Paradise*, where fabric reproducing the plants from the artist's own cultivated garden 'explodes' and seemingly destroys the contours and structure of the garments. This garden, as probably any other, seemingly does not need you and your body; it can grow, bloom, and flourish by itself, yet you and your body need the garden's refreshment, need the oblivion provided by its plant diversity, the pleasant perspective of disappearing into nature.

A different disappearance of the body or reduction into a different kind of garden is visually narrated by Justė Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's installation *(H)anger*. From the simplest hangers used for clothes, the artist constructs an analogue to traditional Lithuanian straw gardens, i.e., a model of perfect cosmic order. However, the installation is not only about that: the unwearable openwork spatial garment formed from empty hangers echoes the 'walking hangers' phenomenon known in the fashion world, proposing a reflection on the homogenisation and standardisation of the body, the conscious destruction of individuality for the sake of an 'iconic' or canon-obedient spectacle. After all, haute couture is also likened to religion, and the routine of the models serving it evokes already forgotten Christian ascetic practices of fasting and unified living. Like dance, especially classical ballet, whose purely aesthetic-plastic connection with religion as an agent or companion of unearthly, invisible, and mysteriously acting reality is expressed by Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė's video work *Prologue: The Silent Architects*.

Apples echoing the garden and the drama of the first humans' expulsion from Paradise are also noticeable in Renata Maldutienė's work *The Reconstruction of the Mother Goddess*. The elegantly crafted representation of fruit made from purple silk and metal wires hangs like an antique toy in a sterile vitrine cleansed of everyday life's residue and present-day realities, together with elements of women's wear: a corset, bra, skirt, gloves, and long stockings or boots. The fragile and translucent gold-coloured silk garment parts allow one to imagine and distinctively contemplate the bodily constitution of their vanished owner. The parameters of the stockings-boots fastened with a row of buttons provide information about the being's preliminary height, whilst the corset and bra allow one to imagine the corresponding body parts' forms, as these intimate garments served them, smoothly covering and supporting them, imitating and correcting them... Does Maldutienė's work replicate the principles of exhibiting museum treasures and their methods of telling stories about the vanished past? After all, the elements of clothing (along with apples that serve as strange attributes or symbols) are presented as preserved and displayed coverings of a once-significant or even powerful woman's body, witnesses to her existence. I think that the context of religious artefacts, especially holy relics, could be more important for their perception. Relics of saints—in the form of a body and clothing and other objects that touched it—unlike museum valuables, are not only preserved and exhibited; they are also venerated, appropriately displayed, adorned, supplemented with elements having symbolic purpose (as in this case—silk apples); meanwhile, their historical identity or connection with a once-living and acting person and their mortal body is not always grounded in facts, not always explained by a coherent and reliable narrative. The installation created by Maldutienė is an atmospheric and at the same time materialistic testimony of a specific medium about an unknown and inexplicably revered deity: although one can reconstruct the dimensions of her vanished body, she herself remains unknown—faceless and impersonal, just like the forms and intentions of worshiping her relics.

Roses and Hearts

A kind of opposition to Maldutienė's interpretation of religiosity is Dvilė Gudačiauskaitė's *Rose Garden*. It is not about a hypothetical or imagined deity as an object of religious feeling, but about a religious identity that has left traces in culture. It is an unexpected but at the same time consistent and authentic connection of several cultural elements in a garment through a specific form of devotion with its own tradition—the prayer of the Rosary. The bomber jacket that suggests a military uniform is made of thin woollen shawl decorated with multicoloured rose patterns. I do not know by what route, but such shawls were widespread; my grandmother also had a couple of them, though she did not wear them, but she kept and valued them, because they were of natural, thin wool, and they were sent by relatives from faraway America. I too, have one shawl with crimson roses on a black 'base'; I keep it as a keepsake, an item worth passing on... Gudačiauskaitė transforms the shawls that have been preserved and passed on in one way or another into clothes for other purposes. Thus, the decorative and recognisable fabric in the context of our daily memory culture speaks in two registers: as a contemporary and functional bomber jacket and as the recognisable primary clothing element that has transformed into a new formation—a shawl that echoes its own tradition. The rose pattern in the garment, which reminds us of a protective shield, is complemented by rosary beads. In this devotional object, popularised since the 13th century, each segment is an abstract yet material bead-shaped sign of prayer. To pray the Rosary is to repeat the Hail Mary prayer in a particular way, to continue the centuries-old devotional tradition of our lands in hope of divine protection, just as our grandmothers, owners of brightly coloured thin woollen shawls, hoped for it. To me, Gudačiauskaitė's *Rose Garden* collection is a multi-layered dialogue of fabric and garment about religious tradition and the eternal need for divine protection, and simultaneously, a contemporary attempt to create the possibility of wearing Mary's roses with their evoked religious feeling.

A different form of devotion, although close in essence to Gudačiauskaitė's roses, is expressed in Jolanta Talaikytė's costume collection *Now and Always... Et Nunc, et Semper...* Metal plaques or votive offerings of various forms are often pinned to miraculous images of saints, thus perpetuating personally obtained graces and eternally made vows. Here, metal hearts (single or combined with little crowns, crosses) are pinned onto the garment as distinctive accessories, like brooches and buttons, like medallions and orders. Thus, votives from sanctuaries and altars are transferred onto the 'chest' of a multi-layered garment. They appear next to open thin wire seams (running stitches), safety pins, little ball point pins, i.e., sewing tools reminiscent of the very process of garment formation, and at the same time echoing the punk subculture that took hold in Lithuania in the second half of the 1980s, whose members decorated their clothes, footwear, rucksacks, bags, and even bodies with safety pins, for instance piercing their ears... Metal safety pins embody a rebellious and nonchalant protest aesthetic, while votives convey the phenomenon of belief in miracles and represent an aesthetic of marking graces independent of historical styles. In Talaikytė's works, these two aesthetic strategies collaborate, creating a paradoxical unity. On the one hand, votives, like the silver-shining stitches, pins, and designers' (or perhaps punks') safety pins wound, form, and adorn the fabric through similar methods of piercing/ fastening. On the other hand, metal elements of different origins and purposes, interacting in one 'body' of garment, destroy their former cultural affiliations for the sake of a new identity. What is it like? Luxurious and vulnerable, echoing tradition and seeking new identity expression... To whom does it belong? To the artist creating fashion, or to the work-costume living its own life? Or perhaps, to the ever-contemporary utterance of prayer *Et Nunc, et Semper...*

Bio

Dr Tojana Račiūnaitė is an art historian and a laureate of the Lithuanian National Science Award. Her research focuses on the culture of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, ecclesiastical art, methodologies of art history, and the anthropology of the image. She is the author of monographs, scholarly articles and other academic publications. She teaches at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

English translation by **Raminta Bumbulytė**



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What Is Fashion Research?

Reflections from the *Costume and Contemplation* Project

I approach the topic of artistic research in fashion design with humility and curiosity. It continues to challenge and open up new questions, both within my curatorial practice and within the still-developing field of Lithuanian fashion discourse. Over the past few years, I have been exploring these questions through the project *Costume and Contemplation* (2022–2025), developed between the Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź together with fellow fashion design lecturers and practitioners. Working as a curatorial group — myself, Renata Maldutienė, and Michał Szulc — we set out to create a platform where fashion design could be approached as a medium of thought, and where those who teach and practice fashion design could experiment with this possibility. In this article, I reflect on artistic research in fashion design, drawing on examples from the exhibition and from fashion studies to show how familiar fashion design methods can become tools of inquiry. I suggest that fashion research is inherently multi-methodological, and that gallery-based projects such as *Costume and Contemplation* can contribute to building a more critical and reflective fashion culture in Lithuania.

Beginnings: From Collaboration to Contemplation

The starting point of the project *Costume and Contemplation* can be traced back to the beginning of a collegial friendship with lecturers from the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. We first met them through the Polish Institute in Vilnius, while organising the exhibition *Fashion Design Narratives: 30 Years of the Fashion Design Department in Vilnius*.¹ That exhibition presented works by lecturers and alumni of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, alongside a section dedicated to the creative practices of lecturers and students from the Strzemiński Academy.

Over conversations during installation days, we gradually connected and began to imagine what the next joint project could be. It soon became clear that a more permanent platform was timely and necessary for participants on both sides. From the very beginning, our curatorial work was shaped by a double ambition: to present fashion design as a field that extends beyond the garment into the territory of art, and to create a supportive environment for educator-practitioners who often struggle to find time and space for their own creative practice alongside academic responsibilities.

The title *Costume and Contemplation* was proposed by Renata Maldutienė and immediately resonated with us in its layered meaning. It can be related to the classical distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*: a life oriented towards constant doing and production versus a life oriented towards attention and reflection. Contemporary fashion — especially fast fashion — is firmly embedded in *vita activa*, with its emphasis on the ever-changing production of novelty. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han's critique of hyperactivity and exhaustion in late-capitalist societies, the *Costume and Contemplation* project can be read as a small antidote: a slower, more attentive way of being with garments, materials, and stories.

¹ *Fashion Design Narratives: 30 Years of the Fashion Design Department in Vilnius*, exhibition curated by Renata Maldutienė and Agnetė Voverė, Titanikas Gallery, Vilnius (16 December 2021–15 January 2022), and Panemunė Castle Gallery (21 January –01 June 2022), with works by Sandra Straukaitė, Giedrius Paulauskas, Eglė Žiemytė and others.

And so the first *Costume and Contemplation*² exhibition was organised in 2022 at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź. Bridging the distance between Vilnius and Łódź involved repeated travel between the two cities and many hours spent on site during installation. Taking my first steps as a curator, I vividly remember the labour of curating as a form of mental, physical, and emotional work that resists easy explanation. Amidst the packing and unpacking, the emails and the deadlines, the notion of fashion research slowly began to hover above the very material realities of our curatorial work.

Seeking to deepen the artistic research dimension, we as curators decided to focus the next exhibition on a single theme and to commission new works specifically for it. One of the topics that emerged was religion. By this time, Russia's war against Ukraine had already begun, and questions of uncertainty and faith lingered in all our minds. Eventually, the exhibition was titled *Costume and Contemplation on Religion*³, understanding faith in a broad sense as something the artists could explore in their research. It was first hosted by the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź in 2024, later presented at Titanikas Gallery in Vilnius, and in 2025 moved to Panemunė Castle gallery — where, as I write this piece, the exhibits continue to “speak” to the castle's walls.

Aiming to present the broader conceptual meanings of each work, we decided to organise an international conference under the same title in April 2025. The online conference pushed the participating artists and curators to present and articulate their projects in a more explicitly research-oriented way, which was challenging but ultimately very productive. After an intensive day of presentations and discussions, a strong sense of community emerged. For me, this was the moment when the project clearly moved beyond a series of exhibitions and became a platform for shared reflection and research, and this publication grew quite naturally out of that. Before turning to the works presented in *Costume and Contemplation*, I would like to briefly trace how the notion of artistic research first entered my own practice.

2 *Costume and Contemplation 1*, exhibition at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 21 November 2022–31 January 2023, curated by Renata Maldutienė, Agnetė Voverė, and Michał Szulc, with works by Alevtina Ščepanova and Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė, Agnė Kuzmickaitė, Vidmina Stasiulytė, Dorota Sak, and others.

3 *Costume and Contemplation on Religion*, exhibition curated by Renata Maldutienė, Agnetė Voverė, and Michał Szulc, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź (14 March–14 April 2024), Titanikas Gallery, Vilnius (8 December 2024–9 January 2025), and Panemunė Castle Gallery (18 September–21 November 2025), with works by Maria Wiatrowska, Justė Tarvydė, Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, and others.

Between Objects and Ideas

Drawing from my own experience as an MA student in Fashion Design at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, I remember how the notion of artistic research became part of our everyday discussions. Students — then my course-mates — came from diverse backgrounds, from design and textiles to biotechnology, and were encouraged to test the boundaries of fashion. As a result, many projects moved beyond the garment as a finished product. The study programme promoted experimentation outside conventional fashion design frameworks and reflected a broader global shift toward interdisciplinarity. In this context, one example that stood out and inspired me during my MA studies was the work of Vidmina Stasiulytė, who pursued her doctorate at the Swedish School of Textiles in Borås. Her research expanded understandings of fashion expression — our “visual selves” — by approaching dress as a non-visual, temporal phenomenon in relation to sound, thus opening up the field of sonic design.⁴ It was also in this environment that my own MA project took shape as an experimental magazine, suggesting to me early on that fashion design outcomes could exist in forms other than clothes.

In the academic world, artistic research in fashion is closely tied to third-cycle studies: doctoral programmes that formally recognise practice as a mode of inquiry. The Swedish School of Textiles in Borås, as well as the Royal College of Art in London, the University of the Arts London, and Aalto University in Helsinki, have played an important role in establishing doctoral programmes in which fashion design practice can function as both method and subject of research. At the Vilnius Academy of Arts, in recent years, dissertations related to fashion design have been written by Agnė Kuzmickaitė, Renata Maldutienė, Sandra Mockutė-Cicėnė, and others, each addressing different aspects of fashion within the framework of artistic research.

The usual practice of fashion design relies on creative and material methods: experimentation with textiles, silhouettes, and construction techniques, as well as draping, modelling, and prototyping. A rich visual component is also central, including sketching, collage-making, moodboard creation, among others. Together, these processes shape the conceptual development of the work from the first idea to the final presentation.

⁴ Vidmina Stasiulytė, *Wearing Sound: Foundations of Sonic Design* (PhD diss., University of Borås, 2020).

In projects oriented towards artistic research, however, these methods cease to be mere tools for achieving a design outcome and instead become instruments of inquiry. Depending on the concept, the aim is no longer to create a wearable garment. Constructional explorations, for example, might focus not on achieving a better ergonomic solution but on seeking conceptual connections through construction as such. An example of this approach is Edita Tamošiūnienė and Evelina Dragūnienė's *Holy Denim*, presented in *Costume and Contemplation on Religion*, where construction and material manipulation become a way of questioning the sacred/profane divide of everyday dress.

Autoethnography and reflection also play a significant role in fashion design-based artistic research, and, I would argue, almost inevitably surface in the work of designers who operate within the fashion industry as well. This becomes evident in Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė's project, which engages with Catholic devotional practices and their place in contemporary Lithuania. Drawing on the history of the rosary — from its etymological roots in the Latin *rosarium* ("rose garden") to its role as a "spiritual wreath" offered to the Virgin Mary — the work invokes the embodied piety of older women whose faith was often sustained and transmitted in secrecy during the Soviet period. The designer repurposes fragile, moth-eaten headscarves once worn by devout grandmothers, textiles that are slowly disappearing from provincial churches together with the ageing worshippers who used them. Although the work does not constitute autoethnography in a narrow sense, it operates as a form of collective ethnography, inviting viewers to identify with the figure of the praying grandmother and the fading headscarf as a shared cultural memory.

In other cases, material practice itself becomes a way of knowing — textile work becomes a form of 'knowledge through making'. An instance of this is Justina Semčenkaitė's project *Knits of Activism*, in which the process of knitting functions as a form of activism and the final garments bear explicit political messages. Further examples include biodesign projects by Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė and Alevtina Ščepanova. Their work takes the form of human-plant creative partnerships, situated within the fields of bio art and bio design. These projects expand traditional understandings of creative collaboration and suggest that fashion and textile practices can be developed together with living systems, not only inspired by them.

The approaches outlined above illustrate just several different points of entry into fashion as an expanded field. In my view, the distinctiveness of the *Costume and Contemplation* project lies in the fact that each participant is a trained fashion design professional, educated and experienced in the industry.

²⁸ Consequently, they are deeply familiar with fashion design methodologies and possess an intuitive, practice-based understanding of its processes. Each author chooses a different way of "entering" the field — whether through conceptual thinking, material experimentation, autoethnographic reflection, speculative design, activism, or biodesign —and in doing so mobilises fashion's existing tools for research and reveals the potential of fashion design to expand its own disciplinary boundaries.

If we think of design as a perpetual beta version — always evolving and never fully complete — it may become easier to see how it can be positioned in proximity to artistic research. Fashion design is by nature in motion: trends are reinvented, garments are reworked, and meanings shift with the body, the wearer, and the context. The examples discussed in this section suggest that, when fashion is approached as artistic research, this openness is not a problem to be solved but a condition to work with. As Vytautas Michelkevičius argues, it is difficult to formulate a single definition of artistic research, since it always has to be adapted to a specific context, paradigm, and the position of the person speaking about it.⁵ In this situation, traditional fashion design tools may be set aside or radically reinterpreted, and the aim is no longer to arrive at a functional garment but to use the format of dress as a medium for thinking.

Fashion Research and Fashion Studies

For fashion design methods to be recognised as artistic research, they usually have to be articulated beyond the studio or the exhibition space. In practice, this often means embedding creative processes in theoretical frameworks, borrowing concepts from other disciplines, documenting and reflecting on the work in written and visual form. Practice-based fashion research is inherently interdisciplinary. The question of how to frame and legitimise it is not unique to artistic research but is also central to debates within the more theoretical field of fashion studies.

Fashion does not operate solely at the level of material objects. It is also a system for producing symbols, distinctions, and social meanings. Fashion circulates not only clothes but also meta-products such as style, youth, beauty, prestige, and recognition. These immaterial dimensions drive the industry and are equally crucial for its critical analysis. The challenge for fashion researchers is therefore to develop methods that can address both the tangible and the intangible.

⁵ Vytautas Michelkevičius, "Meninio tyrimo sampratos ir kontekstai: paini pradžia ir atspirties taškai [Concepts and Contexts of Artistic Research: A Confusing Beginning and Points of Departure]," *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 79 (2015): 41.

Fashion studies emerged when previously separate interests in dress in art history, sociology, and cultural studies began to come together. Over time, these converging interests formed an interdisciplinary field focused on dress, the body, identity, and representation.⁶ The launch of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* in 1997 was an important moment in legitimising the study of fashion within academia and in sketching the contours of this field. At the same time, the institutionalisation of fashion studies has remained uneven: within universities it is still often characterised as relatively “weak” in terms of research status and departmental recognition, even as small, well-funded research clusters have appeared in Europe and beyond.⁷ Because of this in-between position, there is ongoing debate about whether fashion studies should be understood as a distinct discipline or as an interdisciplinary field that draws on history, sociology, anthropology, media, and gender studies. This openness has both strengths and weaknesses: fashion research benefits from remaining relatively “undisciplined”, but it also struggles with fragmented approaches and an ongoing search for legitimacy.⁸ These debates are closely connected to funding, institutional visibility, and what kinds of projects can actually be carried out.

In this context, it is clear that such projects like *Costume and Contemplation* depend on concrete institutional support. The most recent exhibition and conference, as well as this publication, were made possible through support from the Lithuanian Council for Culture, and this in itself signals that fashion-related research can be taken seriously within national funding structures. At the same time, the ambiguity around where fashion “belongs” is very familiar to me. While writing for cultural magazines, I have repeatedly found myself in conversations with editors about which section my texts on fashion should appear in, as if the act of categorising them might finally settle what fashion is really “about.” And so if fashion studies sits between disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, artistic research in fashion design is still defining its own forms and ways of working within the art and design field.

Fashion exhibitions in Lithuania remain relatively rare, which perhaps sharpens their impact. Our relationship with clothing is both everyday and intimate; it is shaped by touch, habit, and stories, and it evolves as new associations and sensitivities emerge. This became especially clear during guided tours of *Costume and Contemplation on Religion*, when visitors often shared personal stories about inherited clothes, or ritual garments associated with particular life events. In this sense, projects like *Costume and Contemplation* suggest that fashion research is not confined to academia. It can also take the form of objects displayed in a gallery, conversations with visitors, and collaborative reflection and projects involving designers, curators, and scholars.

6 Anneke Smelik, “Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices,” *Fashion Theory* 21, no. 5 (2017).

7 Peter McNeil, “Conference Report: ‘The Future of Fashion Studies,’” *Fashion Theory* 14, no. 1 (2010).

8 Francesca Granata, “Fashion Studies In-between: A Methodological Case Study and an Inquiry into the State of Fashion Studies,” *Fashion Theory* 16, no. 1 (2012); Heike Jenss, ed., *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Efrat Tseëlon, “Fashion Research and Its Discontents,” *Fashion Theory* 5, no. 4 (2001).

Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed to show how fashion research emerges through the Costume and Contemplation project and becomes visible not only in finished works but also in the processes and communities that form around them. Situating the project within the broader field of fashion studies suggests that many of the questions it raises – about interdisciplinarity, legitimacy, and methods – are shared across the field. For me, this is precisely where the potential of fashion research lies: in its ability to remain open, multi-methodological, and attentive to lived experience, while still creating conditions for critical reflection. I hope that projects like this will continue to nurture a culture of fashion research in Lithuania in the years to come.

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Exhibiting Fashion: The Relevance and Importance of Fashion Exhibitions in the Context of Contemporary Culture

The Louvre, frequently cited as the world's most renowned art museum, inaugurated its first exhibition in 1793. At that time, the museum's opulent halls displayed 537 paintings, culled from the French royal collection and confiscated church property.¹ Over the ensuing centuries, the Louvre amassed a historical collection spanning painting, sculpture, archaeology, and design objects that cover millennia of human civilization; today, the museum and its repositories house more than half a million works. The Louvre is perceived as an encyclopedia of art, with nearly 400 exhibition rooms serving as pages and chapters of cultural history. Yet, in 2025, the Louvre's administration made a seemingly unexpected decision, organizing the first fashion exhibition in the museum's 231-year history.²

¹ "The Musée du Louvre at a Glance," *Louvre.fr*, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://presse.louvre.fr/le-musee-du-louvre-en-bref-1063000220316/>.

² "Art and Fashion: Statement Pieces," *Louvre.fr*, 2025, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/exhibitions/louvre-couture>; Miles Socha, "EXCLUSIVE: First a Fashion Exhibition at the Louvre — Now a Grand Fashion Dinner, Too," *WWD*, January 16, 2025, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/louvre-fashion-exhibition-gala-dinner-1236847480/>.

Although fashion exhibitions are hardly a novelty in Paris, the “Louvre Couture” exhibition, which opened in early 2025, arrived as a surprise. This is primarily because the Louvre does not typically collect fashion objects; the archiving and curation of costume is generally the purview of the nearby *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* and the fashion-focused *Palais Galliera*. A second compelling detail is that the exhibition displayed approximately 100 haute couture objects within historic 19th-century apartments, deliberately referencing the very era when the field of haute couture began to develop in Paris.³

All fashion exhibits were curated to foster a dialogue with the surrounding furniture, textiles, and artworks from the Louvre’s permanent collection, acknowledging that art and historical artifacts frequently serve as a wellspring of inspiration for designers. Thus, a *Chloé* dress from 1976—dating to the Karl Lagerfeld era—“conversed” with 17th-century Chinese porcelain and lacquered furniture, while a 2023 armored dress by Demna for *Balenciaga* corresponded with the authentic armor of King Henry II from 12th-century England. This is not merely an aesthetic game; such juxtapositions highlight a fundamental characteristic of fashion as a cultural phenomenon: its capacity to absorb, reconstruct, and re-inscribe various artistic and material traditions back into culture. Today, fashion often operates as an intermediate mode of viewing that bridges disparate times, aesthetics, and political trajectories. In such a context, designers’ works become not merely garments, but commentaries on visual culture.

Why was fashion exhibited at the Louvre specifically in 2025? According to exhibition curator Olivier Gabet, the Louvre, which attracts nearly 9 million guests annually, does not necessarily need more visitors, yet evolution is imperative. Presenting the exhibition alongside Museum Director Laurence des Cars, the curator noted that while the institution’s program increasingly creates space for contemporary art, choreography, theater, and design, fashion had notably been excluded from consideration until now.⁴ This is paradoxical: fashion serves as perhaps the most precise anthropological and sociological documentation of its time, and it is the fashion conglomerates that are currently establishing the most compelling new art spaces. Millions travel annually to view exhibitions at the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, established by LVMH, or the *Bourse de Commerce*, founded by Kering. Also: Prada created the *Fondazione Prada spaces in Milan and Venice, which help shape Italy’s contemporary art scene*.⁵

3 “Art and Fashion: Statement Pieces,” *Louvre.fr*.

4 Ibid.

5 “About,” *Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection*, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.pinaultcollection.com/en/boursedecommerce>.

However, the relevance of fashion exhibitions is best understood through data. It is worth noting that fashion exhibitions manage to attract the highest visitor flows even in museums with extensive histories. For instance, over the more than 150 years of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's existence, the most visited spectacle was not the legendary Picasso retrospective in 2010, nor the *Mona Lisa's* visit to New York in 1963, nor even the Treasures of Tutankhamun presented in 1978. Attendance records were shattered by the Metropolitan Costume Institute's 2018 exhibition "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination," which was viewed by more than 1.6 million visitors.⁶ Notably, three fashion exhibitions now sit within the top ten most-visited events at the Met.

The situation is analogous on the other side of the Atlantic, where London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) also saw its highest visitor traffic thanks to fashion: the museum's all-time most visited exhibition is the Christian Dior retrospective organised in 2019. It surpassed the previous record-holder—the 2015 exhibition "Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty," dedicated to the work of another legendary designer.⁷

In 2017, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York organized its first fashion exhibition after a hiatus of more than 70 years. The text for the exhibition "Items: Is Fashion Modern?" explicitly stated that the museum had shamefully ignored fashion for too long, and that to keep pace with the zeitgeist, it is essential not to neglect clothing and its sociological, historical, and art-historical analysis.⁸

This latter exhibition deserves closer examination. Its premise appears deceptively simple: a team of experienced design experts led by curator Paola Antonelli spent several years refining a list of fashion objects that shaped the fashion of the 20th and early 21st centuries – and, in turn, contributed significantly to the culture of the era. This initiative was born not merely as an exhibition project, but as an attempt to encourage MoMA to acquire more fashion artifacts, given that the museum's collection is rich in iconic art and design objects but notably lacking in fashion. As curator Antonelli writes, when she began working at the museum in 1994, MoMA had acquired only a single fashion object—a finely pleated Mariano Fortuny "Delphos" gown from the early 20th century.⁹ Since then, the museum purchased apparel elements sporadically, often not for their intrinsic "fashion" value, but for their production technologies (e.g., virtual design solutions) or functional typologies (such as a sports hijab allowing women to move freely, or jacket-shelters designed for the homeless).

6 Tessa Solomon, "From Mona Lisa to Picasso, the Top 10 Most-Visited Met Exhibits of All Time," *ARTNEWS*, April 23, 2020, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.artnews.com/feature/met-museum-most-popular-exhibitions-1202684459/>.

7 Alice Newbold, "Christian Dior Has Surpassed Alexander McQueen As The V&A's Most-Visited Exhibition," *Vogue*, September 3, 2019, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/dior-most-visited-exhibition-v-and-a>.

8 Paola Antonelli and Michelle Millar Fisher, *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 13–15.

9 Paola Antonelli, "Items: Is Fashion Modern?" introductory text for *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York), accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1638>.

In the introductory text for “Items: Is Fashion Modern?”, Antonelli defines the problematic nature of fashion as a field of design—and simultaneously as a sphere with a deep history. She observes that when discussing fashion history, we often elevate the creators and manufacturers rather than the objects themselves. Their symbolic value is presented, rather than their design. Processes and contexts are conveniently glossed over, with choices made to speak less about meanings and more about exotic details of a lifestyle.

Drawing on Antonelli’s ideas, which helped form the list of the 111 most influential fashion objects for the aforementioned exhibition, it is worth noting that every object significant to fashion history possesses three essential levels: stereotype, archetype, and prototype.¹⁰ These levels should be recognizable not only to researchers or historians but also to the museum visitor or the reader of this text. Although the methods for defining a design stereotype are somewhat subjective, they nonetheless rely on collective consciousness or imagination. For example, what do you imagine when you think of a leather jacket? A classic biker jacket likely appears before your eyes, entrenched in pop culture and constantly visible on runways, in stores, in movies, and on the street. This is the design stereotype.

This stereotype can be “traced” back to a historical archetype—the object from which the contemporary stereotypical design stemmed. Sometimes this is a garment belonging to a famous person, and sometimes it is a functional object from another millennium (an interesting example: modern sunglasses and historic Inuit bone eye coverings with small slits to protect eyes from blinding sun and snow). The third level is the prototype. This is often a completely reimagined design that demonstrates how a familiar garment could evolve further, how it might be produced more sustainably, from novel materials, or using contemporary technologies.

What else characterizes garments worthy of becoming museum exhibits and creating pivotal cultural moments? Often, it is the ability to either “transcend” categories of gender, physique, religion, and economic status (like unisex design, or simply plain white t-shirts or jeans) or, conversely, to highlight them to a hyperbolized, almost mythical level (like the *Hermès* “Birkin” bag, a diamond-encrusted engagement ring, or the burkini). Sociologists from Judith Butler to Dick Hebdige emphasize that clothing is not just an aesthetic surface, but a political instrument involving sexuality, subcultural resistance, and the consolidation of identities for marginalized groups.¹¹ In other words, exhibiting fashion means showing evidence of cultural conflicts and shifts.

¹⁰ Antonelli and Fisher, *Items: Is Fashion Modern?*, 16.

¹¹ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979); and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

An important element of history-shaping design can also be its communicative function. For example, at one time this was the protest t-shirt, allowing anyone to express their views anywhere and anytime, or even tattoos, which became acceptable in the public sphere relatively recently. In the 2020s, this could be meme-accessories, showing a level of establishment within internet culture, such as designer Simon Porte Jacquemus's micro-bag "Le Chiquito" or the J.W. Anderson pigeon clutch, which, incidentally, was also exhibited in "Louvre Couture."¹² Such objects are elements not so much of fashion as of a visual economy—they speak to the interplay of gaze, desire, and capital. Thus, exhibiting fashion in museums becomes a study not only of aesthetics but also of media anthropology.

However, exhibiting fashion also possesses another, much more complicated dimension that is often left unspoken. A garment is not just an object; it is a document of the body, movement, and temporality. As fashion scholar Valerie Steele, director of *The Museum at FIT* in New York, notes that an exhibited garment is always "incomplete" because it lacks the body for which it was created.¹³ To add more, the conservation of clothing is an extremely complex process: fabrics tend to disintegrate, deform, and react to humidity and light. The mannequin is also not neutral—it represents a standardized body, often white, thin, and static. Therefore, fashion exhibitions are increasingly becoming inquiries into the politics of corporeality; for this reason, traditional mannequins are sometimes replaced by abstract structures that allow the garment to speak without the dictates of bodily norms.

What does the popularity of recent fashion exhibitions suggest about art institutions themselves and, more importantly, their audiences? Fashion attracts visitors for whom historical or conceptual contemporary exhibitions may seem too removed from current realities, whereas clothing more easily integrates into pop culture iconography and implies a personal, bodily experience. Ultimately, upon viewing a piece of fashion, we can immediately evaluate it through perspectives of craftsmanship, style, social conventions, and class, while simultaneously considering aspects of technology, consumption, sexuality, history, or interdisciplinarity.

It is also worth raising another question—why is the relationship between fashion and art (and its institutions) often viewed as complicated? Primarily because fashion (and with it, textiles) was for a long time not considered part of the creative field at all—rather, it was relegated to the sphere of domesticity. This correlates with the societal position of women, as unpaid labor related to the household, often performed specifically by housewives, was not deemed worthy of authorship or serious study in itself. A turning point occurred in the second half of the 19th century, when artisanal fashion began to be branded with labels, and the socially influential figure of the designer emerged.¹⁴

¹² "JW Anderson Pigeon Clutch," JW Anderson Official Site, accessed December 1, 2025.

¹³ Valerie Steele, "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition," *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008): 9–10.

¹⁴ "Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895) and the House of Worth," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, accessed December 1, 2025, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wrth/hd_wrth.htm.

The dialogue between fashion and art intensified in the 1930s with the rise of movements that sought to dismantle the boundaries of high art and infuse it into the everyday. A great example is the collaborative projects between fashion surrealist Elsa Schiaparelli and painter Salvador Dalí, including the famous “Tear” dress (1938), imitating skin peeling off the body, the “Skeleton” motif created by forming ridges on the fabric to echo skeletal structure (also created in 1938), or the dress adorned with Dalí’s famous lobster (1937).¹⁵ It is not without reason that her French rival Gabrielle Chanel refused to call her a clothing designer, mockingly saying that Schiaparelli was an artist who sometimes made clothes. Truthfully, there are plentiful examples of similar collaboration, and during the interwar period, fashion was also created by artists who chose clothing or accessories as their medium—some of the best examples are the gloves and jewelry created by Méret Oppenheim, deliberately evoking a surrealist effect of uncanniness (they are, incidentally, included in the MoMA collection).

The intensified image culture of the mid-20th century—characterized by highly accessible press, booming publishing, photography, and the rise of television—appears to have shifted the dialogue between art and fashion in an unexpected direction, while simultaneously raising an uncomfortable question: to whom does the work, its image, and the ideas it carries truly belong? If something can be publicly seen and photographed, can this material be used for further creation? Although direct copying of artworks is better left outside the scope of this text, in fashion this became a sensitive phenomenon: seeing competitors armed with cameras attending fashion shows alongside press representatives, some designers banned the press from distributing photos of their collections, and in 1956 Cristóbal Balenciaga held his presentation only for clients, leaving journalists outside entirely.¹⁶

A new branch in the conversation between fashion and art emerged in the early 1960s. Specifically, in 1965, when Yves Saint Laurent presented an autumn collection with a finale of six cocktail dresses. Saint Laurent conceived their color scheme and design while flipping through a book he received from his mother for Christmas: *Piet Mondrian: Sa vie, son œuvre* by Michel Seuphor.¹⁷ The designer once said that “there is nothing purer in the world of art than Mondrian’s works,” so the design of the dresses dedicated to Mondrian could not be overly complicated. The design required to sew the dresses from sturdy wool jersey, where each element of a different color was a separate piece of fabric. Although it looks as if we are seeing a pattern simply printed on the dresses, in reality, the black dividing lines and colour blocks within are sewn together with extremely fine seams, creating a trompe-l’œil effect: the eye sees a three-dimensional object that appears two-dimensional, like the painting itself (fun fact: the author of the construction was the then-young and unknown Tunisian Azzedine Alaïa).

¹⁵ Dilys E. Blum, *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2003).

¹⁶ “Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895–1972),” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*.

¹⁷ “The Mondrian Revolution,” Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://fashionexhibitionmaking.arts.ac.uk/new-display-for-the-collections-the-mondrian-revolution/>.

The “Mondrian” dresses immediately became a hit and graced the cover of *Vogue*, with critics calling them masterpieces that built a bridge between the worlds of high fashion and art. Unfortunately, Mondrian himself did not see the clothes, as he died of pneumonia in 1944. Why is this important? Because Saint Laurent used elements of the artist's work without seeking permission, without contacting his family or heirs, even if from the finest intentions and knowing now that after the collection's presentation, Mondrian's works reached new heights of fame: the first Mondrian retrospective was held in Paris in 1969. Also, Saint Laurent himself had acquired five Mondrian paintings by the end of his life.¹⁸ An interesting inversion of the norm—it is the designer's work that popularizes the language of art and expands its audience.

More than one book has been dedicated to the relationship between the fashion created by Saint Laurent and art, as the designer was intensely interested in the visual arts and repeatedly created themed collections inspired by different artists: Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein. While there is no doubt that Saint Laurent knew a great deal about art, being a meticulous collector himself, art historians often view his works as rather flat appropriations, describing the designer's method as “borrowed prestige” or “simulated depth of ideas.” It is perhaps even somewhat ironic that Saint Laurent became the first fashion designer to be given a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1983.¹⁹

Approaching our own times, the discourse of fashion and art raises even more complex questions, often related to commerce and mass production. The dilemma of “borrowed prestige” is frequently reconsidered because it is no longer clear who needs the exposure more: the artists, the art institutions, or the fashion houses. Yet, fashion exhibitions perform a unique function of cultural capital circulation, where cultural fields are not isolated—an exchange of prestige constantly occurs between them. Therefore, one should not be surprised that fashion conglomerates today play an increasingly important role in museum funding, while museums shape prestigious narratives about fashion houses. Exhibitions become a kind of declaration of power: they testify to who is allowed to “enter” the canon of high culture and who remains in the margins. However, this dynamic is not necessarily unequivocally negative—it also allows museums to realize ambitious projects for which they would previously have lacked resources.

Another critical aspect is the relationship of fashion and design with technology. 3D printing, digital materials, virtual reality, and generative platforms are changing not only the creation of fashion but also its exhibition. Exhibitions are beginning to document not only physical garments but also processes: the aesthetics of algorithms, collections created by artificial intelligence, the play of digital clothing. This expands the museum's mission—it becomes a workshop exploring not only fashion's past but also its possible futures.

18 *Ibid.*

19 “Yves Saint Laurent: 25 Years of Design,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16028coll14/id/4961/>.

The question arises: will this rising wave of fashion exhibitions reach the Eastern European region? Yes and no. Yes, because a young generation of fashion researchers and creators is emerging, viewing fashion as an integral part of cultural discourse and constantly exploring fashion's connections with textile, sculpture, painting, or design. The ascendancy of visual social media culture also has a positive influence on the field, as many of us evaluate what we wear more carefully and develop greater sensitivity to the nuances communicated by attire and their implications. Even without actively following fashion, we possess more knowledge about it than ever before. Fashion or costumes are exhibited by the Museum of Applied Arts and Design and the Church Heritage Museum in Vilnius, as well as the M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art and its branches in Kaunas. Works by fashion design students and researchers can be seen at the Vilnius Academy of Arts exhibition hall "Titanikas" or other city spaces, and the work of Lithuanian designers has been included in exhibitions at the MO Museum on more than one occasion.

However, progress is impeded by structural deficiencies: there is a lack of fashion curators, textile restorers, consistent archives, and specialized funds, while collections of historical clothing remain fragmentary. Exhibiting fashion or textile objects requires complex technical solutions, expensive equipment, and meticulous care. Nevertheless, this stage resembles the early 1990s in Lithuanian contemporary art—possessed of much creative energy and great potential for growth, despite limited resources.

Therefore, it is worth looking at the success stories of international museums not through the lens of impossibility, but through that of inspiration. Fashion, exhibited as a cultural object, has today become one of the most accurate ways to understand both past and present society. It unfolds what art or history often does not tell: everyday stories of body politics, social norms, technological shifts, and cultural fractures. By exhibiting fashion, we essentially exhibit how we perceive the world ourselves—how we wear it, how we see it, and how we would like to change it.

Bio

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Fashion Design on the Transcendent Reality of the 21st Century or the Objectification of Faith. Two Cases.

This review discusses two objects exhibited at the international Lithuanian and Polish fashion exhibition *Costume & Contemplation On Religion* (January 9 – August 2, 2025, VDA Titanikas Exhibition Hall, curators: Michał Szulc, Renata Maldutienė, Agnietė Voverė). The choice of works was determined by the material dissimilarity of the objects – as if they represented two thematic extremes of the exhibition – and by their conceptual affinity, a shared language addressing the same theme. The organisers state that “*the exhibition explores the individual’s relationship with the transcendent reality*”¹, where the visual narrative intertwines stories, events, or religious experiences related to faith, which have influenced and/or shaped the worldview and creativity of fashion designers. In discussing the objects, we shall refer both to visual material and to the authors’ texts – the short descriptions of the exhibited works in the exhibition catalogue – yet we shall not rely directly on verbal interpretations of the works, since we are unaware of the events that befell the creators or of what

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1 The authors’ text introducing the exhibition display.

they experienced. Since the possibility of imagining someone else's religious experience seems to offer little potential, we shall attempt to "unlock" what the objects themselves reveal when "*they objectify experiences that are difficult to define in words alone*"². The first object, Renata Maldutienė's installation *The Reconstruction of the Mother Goddess* (2024, silk, cotton, wool, and metal), is part of the artistic research project *Dialogues of Fashion Design: The Changing Place and Power of Women in a Patriarchal World*. Renata raises the question: if God is conceived as our Father, where has our Mother – the Goddess – gone? At the centre of the work are elements of women's clothing reminiscent of undergarments. The second chosen object is Justė Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's installation *(H)anger* (2024), a hanging structure made of used dry-cleaner hangers which, according to the author, are connected into an object resembling traditional Lithuanian *sodai* (straw design)³.

What it looks like and what can be seen

From a formal point of view, Maldutienė's object consists of soft materials and light, translucent forms – as if desiccated, shimmering sheds of a body suspended in space. A body that has seemingly shed its skin like a snake and vanished somewhere, leaving traces – parts of a costume that may either reunite into a whole or ultimately dissolve, be lost, vanish, just like their owner, the Mother Goddess, has. Distances are maintained between the separate parts of the costume, installed within an "outstepped" dark metal frame. Some elements: a stocking (or a shoe) and an accessory, an apple – hanging higher, above the frame, while the other half of the shoe or leg covering remains within it. This composition suggests dynamism, allowing one to infer the Goddess's escape or at least attribute movement to the object. This movement appears human, for the garment left behind resembles something hastily dropped while preparing to leave – but here it floats in midair, lingering in space.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The artist does not depict the Goddess herself; the reconstruction is paradoxical – presence is shown through absence, through traces of existence, through what remains. The cast-off shells or skins, the Goddess's belongings: what she might have carried, possessed, what belonged to her. Three fabric apples, glossy and object-like owing to the choice of silk fabric – their golden sheen evokes icons or ecclesiastical relics, imparting an ephemeral quality; they do not resemble realistic, edible fruit. The black metal frame appears to fail in its function: it does not frame, contain, restrict, capture, or focus the image; the viewer's gaze cannot unify the scattered costume fragments into a coherent whole. The question of where the Mother Goddess has gone receives no visual answer; instead, the installation conveys more strongly a moment of escape or loss – much like when we look upon the personal belongings of a deceased or long-absent loved one, or at children's outgrown clothes. We have the material substance; we can touch it, yet what we hold in our hands, what we experience tactilely, is, in truth, loss. This is precisely what makes Maldutienė's proposition unique – the artist creates conditions to experience disappearance, suspending and prolonging precisely that very moment which we cannot grasp in reality. For when a person disappears (not necessarily in a miraculous sense), it is difficult to tell the precise moment of disappearance: when they closed the door, when they disappeared from our sight, when they finally walked away, drove off, departed by train, or – as befits deities – by water and air? In all cases, this is an action of limited duration, with a beginning and an end, after which we no longer see the one who disappears. Yet there is no beginning in the artwork – the visual narrative; we do not know how the Mother Goddess appeared in these garments before her disappearance. If we assume these are bodily coverings, we may imagine or infer the contours of her body, but not her face. Nor is there an end, because the implied movement prevents us from viewing the exhibited objects as in a museum, where objects are statically framed, placed in display cases, and *endowed* with a history or some kind of linear narrative. Here, the story does not yet exist – it is being constituted; the narrative is in the process of becoming, told in the present tense. In disappearing, the deity leaves behind her garments, like Eglė the Queen of Serpents from one of the most renowned and popular Lithuanian folk tales with a tragic ending⁴. There exist numerous versions of this tale, and in all of them the protagonist highly values a material artefact – in one version, a garment or shirt; in another, a lost ring. In exchange for the returned object, she pledges herself, agreeing to marry an animal, the serpent.

4 More about this tale in Lithuanian can be read here: <https://zemaitiuzeme.lt/aktualijos/pasaka-egle-zalciau-karaliene/> [accessed on 2025-10-03].

Justė Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's installation (*H*)anger consists of empty metal clothes hangers, whose shape prevents them from coalescing into a symmetrical hanging *sodas*⁵. The structure appears sharp, uncomfortable, tangled, and menacing. The first association that arises is the hanger as a medical instrument used in illegal abortions – a notion the artist herself mentions in the object's description as an anticipated impression⁶. However, this is not what constitutes the most valuable content of the work; such an interpretation of the metal hanger seems conventional and has been repeatedly escalated across various art genres. More compelling is the deliberate invocation of the form of the Lithuanian *sodas* (hanging ornament), which appears to be a conscious engagement with opposing meanings. The *sodas* fails to take root within the work – attempting to perceive it, one cannot detach from the visual expressiveness of the hanger, its materiality, and the almost canonical meanings already attached to such an object. Thus, knowing about the *sodas* from the artist's own interpretation makes the act of viewing even more disturbing. The object, which may also be regarded as a sculpture, exerts a powerful impact precisely through this unsettling observation – as if one cannot avert the gaze, even though it offers no aesthetic satisfaction; the work seems to “prick” the eyes. The hangers used are the most ordinary, inexpensive, industrial ones – the kind used for garments retrieved from the dry cleaner's, and which, like uninvited yet persistent guests, often “settle” in our wardrobes. Empty hangers may also signify travel – someone took the clothes and left to hang them elsewhere; perhaps, in their haste to leave, they piled the hangers together.

In seeking an answer to the question of where the garments have gone and why the author – a fashion designer – eliminated the central object of the fashion world, it is crucial to note that this gesture signals an important shift within the Lithuanian fashion scene. The designer-researcher no longer caters to the client's eye or taste, nor fulfils expectations (for instance, what one might anticipate seeing in a costume-focused exhibition); instead, they provoke, “prick” with uncomfortable themes. The association with the Lithuanian *sodas* appears to have an element of irony – addressed to those still seeking soothing contemplation within the 21st-century fashion world. The volumetric form, intended to replicate the Lithuanian symbol of domestic harmony and unity with the world, produces precisely the opposite impression due to its material – metal – contrasting sharply with the traditional straw hanging *sodas*. It seems to symbolise today's conflict with the world, conflict with the body, invasive medical procedures, or similarly intrusive behaviour toward nature, the environment, and the ecosystem of the lived world. Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's object visualises a disharmonious, brutal system of the fashion world. The empty frame – the supporting structure on which we are accustomed to seeing a fashion object, a garment – becomes the most significant element. Unlike David

5 You may listen to Marija Liugienė's account of this object in Lithuanian and view the shapes of *sodas* here: <https://on.lt/dangaus-sodai>, [accessed on 2025-10-05]

6 The authors' text introducing the exhibition display.

Mach's sculptures⁷, human and animal figures assembled from hangers, or Dan Steinhilber's (b. 1972) hangers wrapped in paper in his work *Untitled* (2002–2008)⁸, Justė's hangers are not merely material for a sculpture but constitute a self-sufficient, primary object – one we must, and are compelled to, scrutinise.

What does it resemble, and what can one think about it?

Thus, where has the costume gone, and what do designers believe in? Where has the Mother Goddess disappeared, and how is ((H)anger) connected to religion? It appears that, in the exhibition's exploration of their "*relationship with transcendent reality*," and in questioning what constitutes *sacrum* and what *profanum* for today's fashion creator,⁹ the designers' gaze turns inward – and seems to linger there – while disillusionment with the superficial everyday reality of 21st-century fashion escalates into anger. Just as Socrates, while searching for the Gods, realizes that he believes in his own conscience¹⁰, so contemporary designers, engaging with religious and philosophical themes, turn toward themselves (through this exhibition) and place their faith in ethics and conceptual sustainability – above all, in ideas. They remove garments from hangers and search for a vanished, dispersed system of values, seeking its foundation in the form of a deity. And they no longer dress a human being but craft garments for God – for a Female deity (as we may assume, since the garment replicates precisely such bodily shapes). The garment appears miraculous yet wearable, as if inviting one to try it on, to embody the Goddess's casing. In this sense, the object also functions as provocation: perceiving in the garment the flawless contours of the Mother Goddess's body, we may compare them with our own – will we fit into the divine corset or not?

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⁷ The sculptures can be viewed on the artist's website: <https://davidmach.com/just-david-revised/> [accessed on 2025-10-03].

⁸ A photograph of the work can be viewed here: <https://artistsofutah.org/15Bytes/index.php/dan-steynhilber/>, [accessed on 2025-10-03].

⁹ The authors' text introducing the exhibition display.

¹⁰ This story in Lithuanian can be found here: <https://aplinkeliai.lt/filosofijos-istorija/graiku-mokytojas-sokratas/>

Both Maldutienė's and Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's exhibited works – examples of critical and speculative design – operate through a material, tactile relationship, strangely evoking the viewer's corporeality: recalling bodily needs and expectations, only to disregard them. It is as if, through an unreal garment (in one case entirely withdrawn from our sight, in the other distanced and presented as divine), we are invited to activate the voice of conscience while wandering through the *Holzwege*¹¹ of the 21st-century fashion – a forest containing paths, often overgrown with trees, which suddenly end where the forest remains untrodden. This exhibition seemingly both signals and reflects the designer's position – as if reaching the end of a false path and needing to continue trodden it further. On the other hand, everyone walks their own path, even within the same forest. Often, one path appears identical to another. But this is only an illusion; the loggers and "forest wardens" of the fashion world, who clear these paths, understand what it means to journey along *Holzwege*¹², and seemingly visualize precisely this through the exhibition. The designers' work opens up like an uncomfortable yet fire-protecting clearing in the forest.

The ironic temptation to try on the goddess's veil at the peak of *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and other social media trends may be an invitation not to emulate a human whose image captivates us, but a deity.

Research in comparative religion and history of religion by Mircea Eliade verify manifestations of imitation in the realm of the sacred. In the religious form of imitation, the individual, by means of periodically recurring rituals, experiences time cyclically, satisfying an ontological longing for the perfection of man and the beginning of human history. Via the imitation of mythical figures, especially the gods: '*imitatio dei*', in sacral rituals, man participates in the transcendental.¹³

Both discussed objects also share a theatrical quality; either could serve as part of a theatrical costume or a scenographic prop. Maldutienė's reconstruction of the Mother Goddess resembles a *mise-en-scène* intended for deconstruction: the dispersed costume fragments evoke other fragmented and compartmentalized bodies and garments found in the art world. Above all, it evokes associations with one of Pablo Picasso's most renowned works, *Guernica* (1937). In this context, Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's tangled mass of empty hangers – like a relic of a bygone fashion world – evokes associations with the rigid, bombed-out architectural remnants of the city of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War (April 1937) (Spanish Civil War 1936-1939). Similarly, Maldutienė's fashion installation, through its theatrical resolution, appears closely related to two stage designs: the deconstruction of human and animal (horse) bodies by scenographer Julija Skuratova in the performance *The Choice*¹⁴, whose

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Of the Beaten Track*, Germ. *Holzwege*, A book published in 1950, consisting of essays from 1935–1946. The term *Holzwege* denotes a forest path created during logging – an impasse, a metaphor for futile and misguided endeavours.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Of the Beaten Track*, ed. and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Hayens, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 6.

¹³ Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths. A Cultural Critique*, (chapter Philosophic-anthropological implications of fashion), 2013, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 49-50.

¹⁴ A movement and puppet theatre performance based on Edith Eger's book *The Choice*, directed by Gintarė Radvilavičiūtė, scenography by Julija Skuratova, premiere at Vilnius Lėlė Theatre on December 9, 2002. Information about the performance in Lithuanian and visual material can be found here: <https://www.teatraslele.lt/irasas/spektakliai/jaunimui-irsuaugusiems/pasirinkimas/>, [accessed on 2025-10-03].

scenographic concept was directly inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*, as well as the duel scene between Tancredi and Clorinda from Gintaras Varnas's 2008 production of Claudio Monteverdi's (1567–1643) madrigal opera *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*¹⁵.

In the opera, theatre designer Skuratova portrays the duel between the Christian knight Tancredi and his mysterious opponent, encountered near the walls of Jerusalem, as a decelerated dance of the body and its fragmented parts. Bodies alternately assume human form, then disintegrate or merge. Initially, armour seemingly reflects an empty warrior's silhouette, but in the final moments reveals a secret: it turns out that Tancredi has condemned his beloved to death, whom he sees and recognises only after she removes her helmet.¹⁶ Thus, a man and a woman fight, concealed and lost beneath their armour. In Maldutienė's case, it is noteworthy that the Mother Goddess's garment – resembling undergarments – is what lies closest to the body, what would touch divine skin if it were material, and simultaneously functions as armour, an outer layer shielding the mysterious, miraculously perfect body from the human gaze, allowing the viewer only to infer its presence.

Although the body implied by the garment is recognisably feminine, when considering associations with these theatrical images, one may also discern a latent duality in Renata's lost Mother Goddess. This duality arises not only from the tension evident in the author's question regarding the masculine God the Father and the posited feminine counterpart – the Mother Goddess – but also from the connection between these images, since *“by employing fashion design skills and personal religious experience, the author seeks to reconstruct a lost, internal, and harmonious image of Goddess–God.”*¹⁷ Just as Clorinda hides beneath masculine attire, we may speculate what or whose body would appear if the Goddess were found, chose to return, or decided to incarnate into the garment. The effectiveness of the visual solution seems to invite further speculation: if the Goddess is reconstructed and rediscovered, will she eclipse the figure of God the Father, or stand beside him as an equal? Perhaps divinity will become ambivalent – like the contemporary Tiresias: a blind, dual-gendered prophet and guardian of memory, a figure from Greek mythology (Τειρεσίας), famed as the seer of Thebes, who, according to legend, was blinded by the gods for revealing secrets humans were not meant to know.¹⁸ In Socrates' elegiac poem, Tiresias was originally a girl, transformed into a boy at the age of seven, experienced several further gender transformations, eventually returning to a female form, and finally disappearing – turned into

¹⁵ Claudio Monteverdi's (1567–1643) madrigal operas *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* and *Il ballo delle ingrate* were presented at Vilnius Lėlė Theatre, on September 29–October 2, 2008. Opera is based on an episode from Torquato Tasso's epic poem, *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered), Monteverdi composed it for the 1624 Carnival of Venice. Director Gintaras Varnas.

¹⁶ A review of the performance in Lithuanian and a photograph of the stage design can be found here: <https://menufaktura.lt/recenzija/leles-kuria-opera/>, [accessed on 2025-10-05].

¹⁷ The authors' text introducing the exhibition display.

¹⁸ This alludes to the 2012 production at Vilnius Puppet Theatre of Guillaume Apollinaire's play *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (scenography by J. Skuratova). According to director Gintaras Varnas, the play abounds in cultural references; he believes the work itself possesses prophetic power. Apollinaire was a patron of new artistic currents – he supported the Futurists, Dadaists, and future Surrealists. This context is highly significant. Written in 1903, the work in a sense prophesied the emergence of modernism. Moreover, at the beginning of the 20th century, gender transformation was not even discussed, whereas at the beginning of the 21st century, it is not only spoken of – it has become reality. Thus, truly prophetic elements are present. The author himself describes the play's purpose quite simply and modestly: *“...the aim is to change customs / Here we speak of children in the family / The domestic hearth is its theme.”* A review of the performance in Lithuanian can be read here: <https://menufaktura.lt/naujienos/g-varno-koliazas-is-teiresijo-krutu/>, [accessed on 2025-10-04].

a mouse. Maldutienė's Goddess, as an image inhabiting both human, earthly and divine, ephemeral forms, resembles the inhabitants of the Greek pantheon, whose deities possess human characteristics, weaknesses, and flaws. The installation reveals the artist's subtle irony: the Goddess possesses garments of a specific size, fitting a particular body, and is sought after like a missing person, with the garment serving as a trace.

If we recall Kant's adage "clothes make the man"¹⁹, here we might say that clothes make God, the Goddess – allowing us to palpate her body. If we continue to ask, "*does appearance determine being, or being appearance?*"²⁰ and also consider Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's work, the pile of hangers – the *sodas* – may signify absence: non-appearance, invisibility, non-existence, even non-being, a notion further confirmed by the artist's own reflections on the theme of death within the context of fashion. According to Justė, the hanger has become a collective, industry-wide symbol of fashion, evoking the tragic deaths of exhausted models – derisively nicknamed 'walking hangers' – who die while showcasing fashionable collections.²¹ These speculative design objects immerse us in the uncomfortable marvel of the 21st century; following their visual narratives with our imagination, we find ourselves in a disquieting state that reminds us that the present can be consumed responsibly. In this case, the perception of the artwork is analogous to a miracle in the sense that it is not an everyday, ordinary given, but rather something that pulls us away from the mundane or functions as its transgression. According to Tojana Račiūnaitė, the time of human creation is long, whereas the time of the miracle is indeterminate, urgent, and instantaneous²². The viewer may experience the opening (unfolding) of the artwork and, under its influence, remain in that state for a certain duration; yet in all cases, this will be a non-ordinary condition characterized by a beginning – an act of belief in circumstances often impossible within empirical²³ reality – and an end: a return to everyday life.

Thus, if Maldutienė's installation ultimately does not answer the question of where the Goddess has gone, what remains for the viewer who has "tried on" her garment, walked back and forth projecting the contours of an imagined body? We may argue that the most crucial aspect of this work is not the acknowledgment of the Mother Goddess's disappearance, but the implicit assertion that she existed. Renata's costume resembles a 21st-century Shroud of Turin: we do not see God, but we see His imprint on the fabric that covered (or we imagine covered) the body. Thus we believe – we recognise – because there is matter that we can not only see but also touch, experience not only visually but also tactilely. If we consider the Shroud of Turin a forgery painted by a talented 14th-century artist, we may equate it with this Goddess's costume. According to Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė, in the contemporary world

19 Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths. A Cultural Critique*, (chapter Philosophic-anthropological implications of fashion), 2013, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 37.

20 Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths. A Cultural Critique*, (chapter Philosophic-anthropological implications of fashion), 2013, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 42.

21 The authors' text introducing the exhibition display.

22 According to: Tojana Račiūnaitė, *Atvaizdo gyvastis: Holy Mergelės Marijos stebuklingų atvaizdų patirtis Lietuvos Didžiojoje Kunigaikštystėje XVII–XVIII a.*, 61.

23 In this instance, not in an idealist but in a materialist sense.

fashion has become a form of religion, complete with its own cult, prophets, bibles, and icons, and historically, standards of aesthetics and morality have continually sought to control women's bodies and souls.²⁴ The human body appears to have become the primary material and texture of this cult. Paolo Volonté, speaks of the tyranny of thinness in Western societies (evidence for the tyranny of slenderness in Western societies), models are an object of calculation, something continuously worked upon, molded, contested, performed, something that is constantly de- and re-stabilized in new forms. The same is true for ourselves, as through the look we can navigate a situation, the day and life in a direction that we may or may not like.²⁵ Although the *body* of the contemporary deity reconstructed by Maldutienė conforms to current standards, does it truly represent a feminine body shaped by fashionable proportions? The complex visual allusions embedded in the installation prevent the viewer from being certain, relying solely on sight and first impression. For example, the corset-bra component of the Goddess's costume resembles the iconic bra and corset created by Jean Paul Gaultier in 1990 for pop singer Madonna.²⁶ Yet in fact, this bra was originally designed for a toy male teddy bear, which the designer's parents bought him in childhood instead of the doll he longed for but which they refused to purchase for a boy. Thus, is the ambivalent image of the 21st-century Mother Goddess in the installation a promise of harmony in today's world, a hopeful counterbalance to patriarchy, or an ironic, subtle artistic jest directed at the designer's client – the consumer of art and fashion – who places excessive trust in the surface of the fashion world? The dispersed costume fragments, which provoke a desire to reassemble them into a whole and return them to their divine owner – to measure, to make her appear before our eyes and reveal herself – offer no such fulfilment. We must accept the proposed state: a suspended, unspoken secret; a costume (body) hanging in dynamic motion, leaving no alternative but to reconstruct divinity individually and to reflect, within the *sacred-profane* dichotomy, on the relationship between appearance / manifestation and being in this world. It seems that fashion designers are revitalising the ethical values of Stoicism, reminding us that – “social role ought not to be appearance, but being must fill out this role as perfectly as possible and even do so with conviction – *appearance should become being*.”²⁷ The visual polemic of the discussed objects, highlighting the need to reconstruct internal, lost, value-laden content, signals a significant qualitative shift in the contemporary understanding of fashion.

24 The authors' text introducing the exhibition display.

25 Paolo Volonté, *Fat Fashion*, Bloomsbury Academic / Visual Arts, 2021, p. 7.

26 A photograph of the corset can be viewed here: <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/madonna-jean-paul-gaultier-marriage-cone-bra>, [accessed on 2025-10-04].

27 Roman Meinhold, *Fashion Myths. A Cultural Critique*, (chapter Philosophic-anthropological implications of fashion), 2013, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 42.

Instead of conclusions

In answering the question of what constitutes the transcendent reality for today's fashion professionals and what their gaze reveals beyond the physicality of this world, we may say that both discussed objects paradoxically present materialised non-being, allowing us to tangibly grasp absence, lack, and loss. In other words, they frame fashion's core problems within a broader, universal human context. Maldutienė's and Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė's installations, like other works associated here with dramatic events (the Holocaust, death, war), seem to mark a thematic turn in fashion's problematic field, from which the celebration of consumerism ultimately retreats. Fashion designers strip the fashion consumer of the banal, familiar, pleasurable, and comforting escapist joy – by eliminating the very possibility of consumption, they transform their client into a disoriented viewer, for whom the fashion object – a conceptual yet still wearable garment – reveals a transcendent lack.

Bio

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On Experiences of Faith

The project *Costume & Contemplation*, initiated by the Vilnius Academy of Arts (VAA) and the Władysław Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, is, in my view, is both very timely and significant. In a period marked by global crises, artists – including fashion designers – are increasingly turning towards religious themes and sacred motifs. Both artistic practice and religious activity are based on relationships between people and on shared experiences of faith.

Artistic research in the field of design is inseparable from practical and technical skills. It is therefore meaningful to examine how fashion designers rethink their relationship with religion, what modes of expression they choose, and how they combine specific construction, form, and decorative elements shaped by issues that are particularly pressing today. From this perspective I will discuss two international exhibitions, *Costume & Contemplation On Religion* (curated by Michał Szulc, Renata Maldutienė, and Agnetė Voverė), held in different exhibition spaces of the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2025: from 9 January to 8 February in the gallery *Titanikas* and from 23 September to 20 November at Panemunė Castle.

Fourteen fashion design objects based on artistic research, created by authors from Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia (among them two duos of women artists), are characterised by stylistic diversity. Several dominant thematic trajectories can be observed, ranging from concrete interpretations of costume to conceptual spatial ideas. These tendencies manifested in distinct ways in the displays of both exhibitions (exhibition architecture by Ūla Žebrauskaitė-Malinauskė).

From the perspective of artistic research themes, I would distinguish four groups of works in *Costume & Contemplation On Religion*, in which the following aspects become important: symbol and ritual, place and environment, event and situation, archetype and prototype.

In my view, most of the exhibited fashion objects were, in one way or another, more or less related to religious or cult symbols and rituals. In creating a transformable costume consisting of a long black dress and a belt with pockets and a flap, Maria Wiatrowska emphasises elements of Christian symbolism, asceticism, modesty, and reconciliation. Evelina Dragūnienė and Edita Tamošiūnienė use a durable material intended for workwear – denim. The authors deconstruct the usual forms of denim shirts and trousers and highlight seams, rivets, and pockets as unique symbols of personal and cultural identity. By using discarded dry-cleaner hangers and connecting them into an object reminiscent of Lithuanian traditional hanging straw gardens, Justė Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė underscores the universal role of the “hanger” as an attribute of the fashion industry, which often directly governs a woman’s body and soul.

Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė presents a collection of bomber jackets (originally associated with uniforms of the US Air Force) sewn from old floral scarves belonging to pious grandmothers. In this collection, the motif of the rose is linked to the rosary prayer, which helps one to endure and survive in difficult times. Anna Kuźmitowicz is inspired by the Ukrainian ritual towel *rushnyk*, which connects the earthly and heavenly worlds. She shapes the garment in a specific way – wrapping the body in knitwear and recreating the symbolism of human life from birth to death. In creating garments with complex silhouettes and layering silk fabrics, Sonja Šterman brings forth the idea of a cocoon that cyclically oscillates between life and death, which she connects to the contemporary revival of silk production in Europe.

Having analysed head coverings worn by women religious and the variations of their forms, Michał Szulc creates sculptural shapes that retain the anatomical structure of the head and, using stiffened cotton fabric, completely cover and conceal the face. This recalls both masochistic masks and painful bandaging – total adaptation and blind servitude. In their creative experiments devoted to the processes of darning, re-darning, and mending, Alevtina Ščepanova and Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė use linen threads and wheat, encouraging us to rethink life and to find time for inner concentration, prayer, and repentance.

The exploration of historical sites or personal environments informs the works of Jolanta Talaikytė and Dorota Sak. Talaikytė is inspired by the history of the architectural complex of the Pažaislis Monastery; her fashion object, created from a jacket and shirt, is deliberately decorated with numerous metal elements. The composition of hearts and crosses attached with safety pins evokes votive offerings – signs of a request or vow, or of personal gratitude, that are most often dedicated in a specific place of prayer. Sak exhibits a dress-and-coat ensemble made from fabric printed with an original digital pattern. This ensemble belongs to the series *Mysterious Garden*, inspired by a photograph of the artist’s own garden – a symbolic reference to the mysterious dwelling place of eternal bliss.

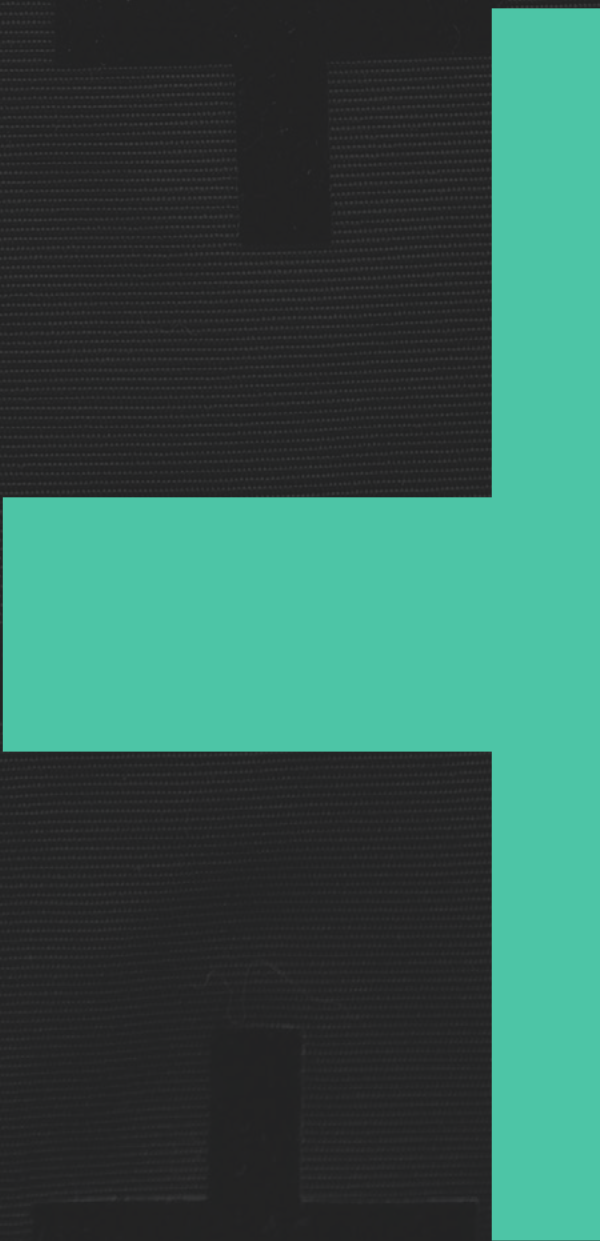
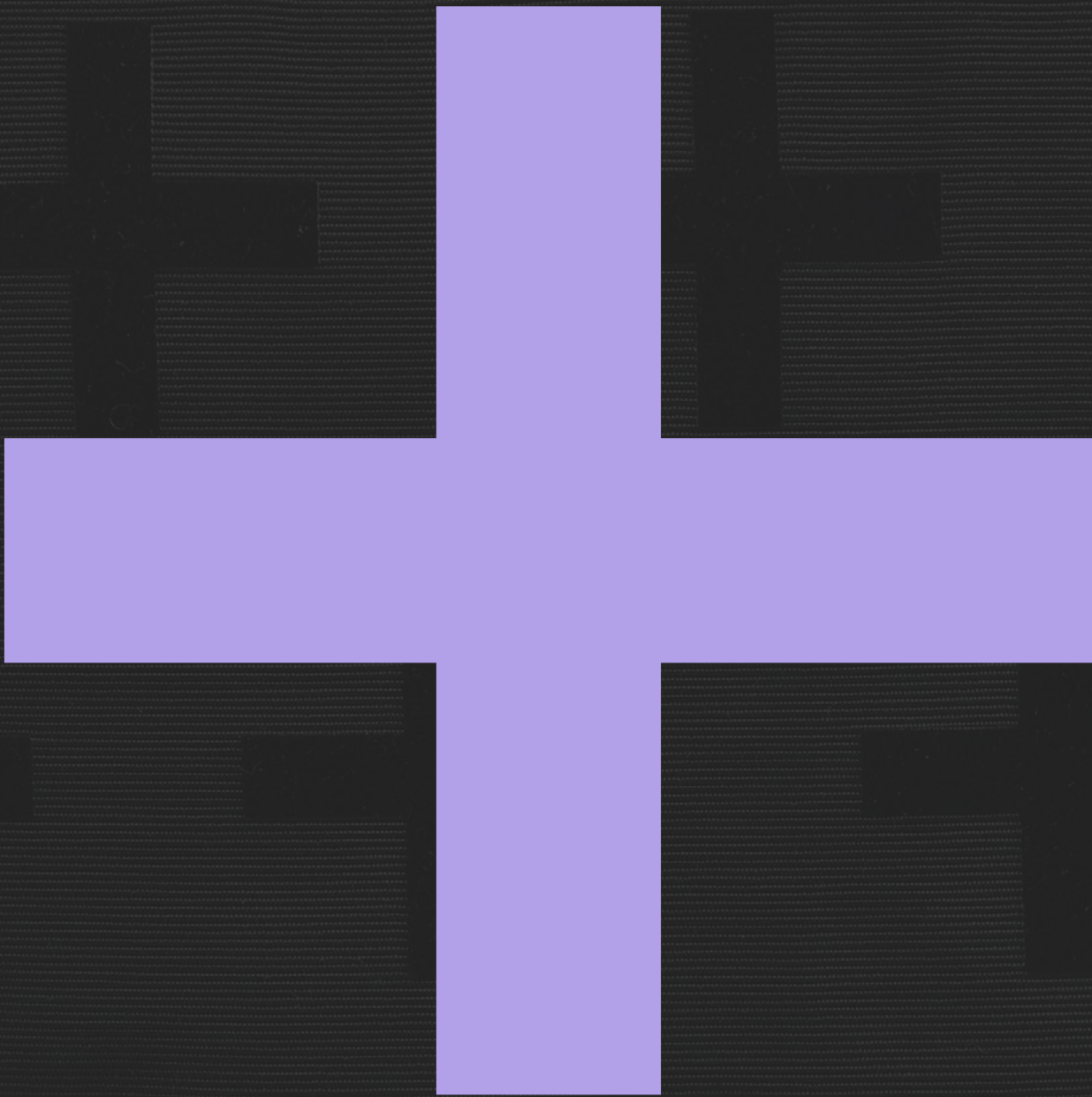
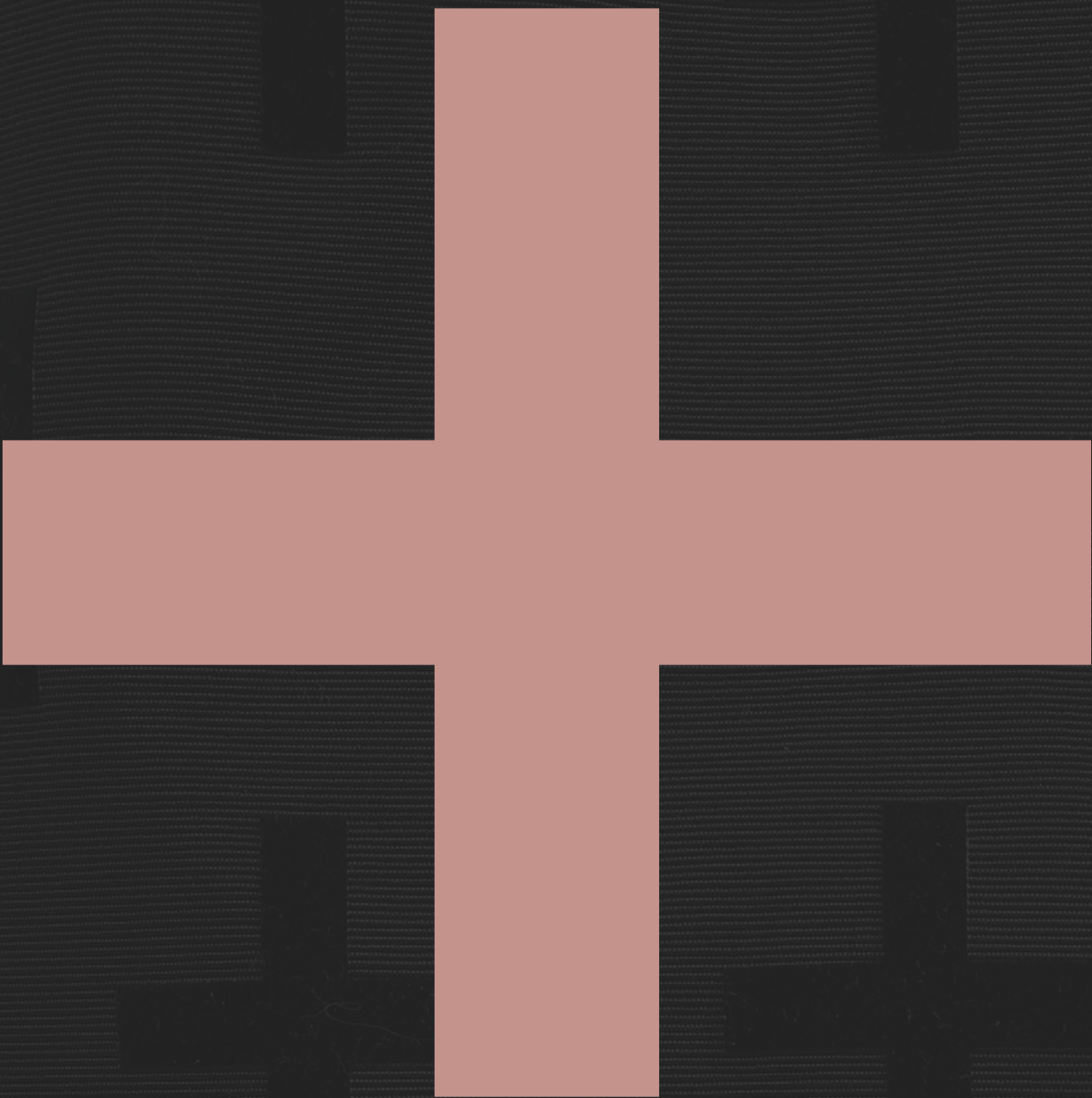
Attention to concrete events or to value-based situations in society becomes pronounced in the works of Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauskė and Justina Semčenkaitė. Drawing on her personal experience, Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauskė exhibits the wedding dress she designed and wore herself, thereby examining changing local traditions and questioning the significance of church marriage. Semčenkaitė's belief in the power of fashion activism is embodied in the exhibitions by a crocheted sunflower dress that recalls the era of "flower children" and pacifism.

The theme of archetype or prototype is elaborated in the complex works of Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė and Renata Maldutienė. Developing a unique method of "object morphing", Šlaičiūnaitė creates a brightly coloured kinetic model from carbon fibre, organza, and feathers, which can function as a headpiece or accessory – a metaphor of divinity or flight. In the artist's film, a mythical ancient astronaut figure appears and a surreal environment is envisioned. Seeking traces of the lost Mother Goddess and aiming to reconstruct the image of the Goddess, while posing the question of whether she remains important to contemporary individuals. Maldutienė presents a conceptual composition made up of elements of women's clothing that function as evidence of the existence of female deities in old and new religions alike.

I would like to emphasise the importance of the continuity of the *Costume & Contemplation* project. It is evident that artistic research in fashion design, visually articulated in the aforementioned international exhibitions, is of interest not only to a narrow circle of professionals but also to a broader public. In my view, in the future a cycle of exhibitions could be developed that would periodically present the work of several authors, and, in addition, larger-scale projects devoted to the artistic research of a single fashion designer.

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Fashion Designers' Artistic Research Projects

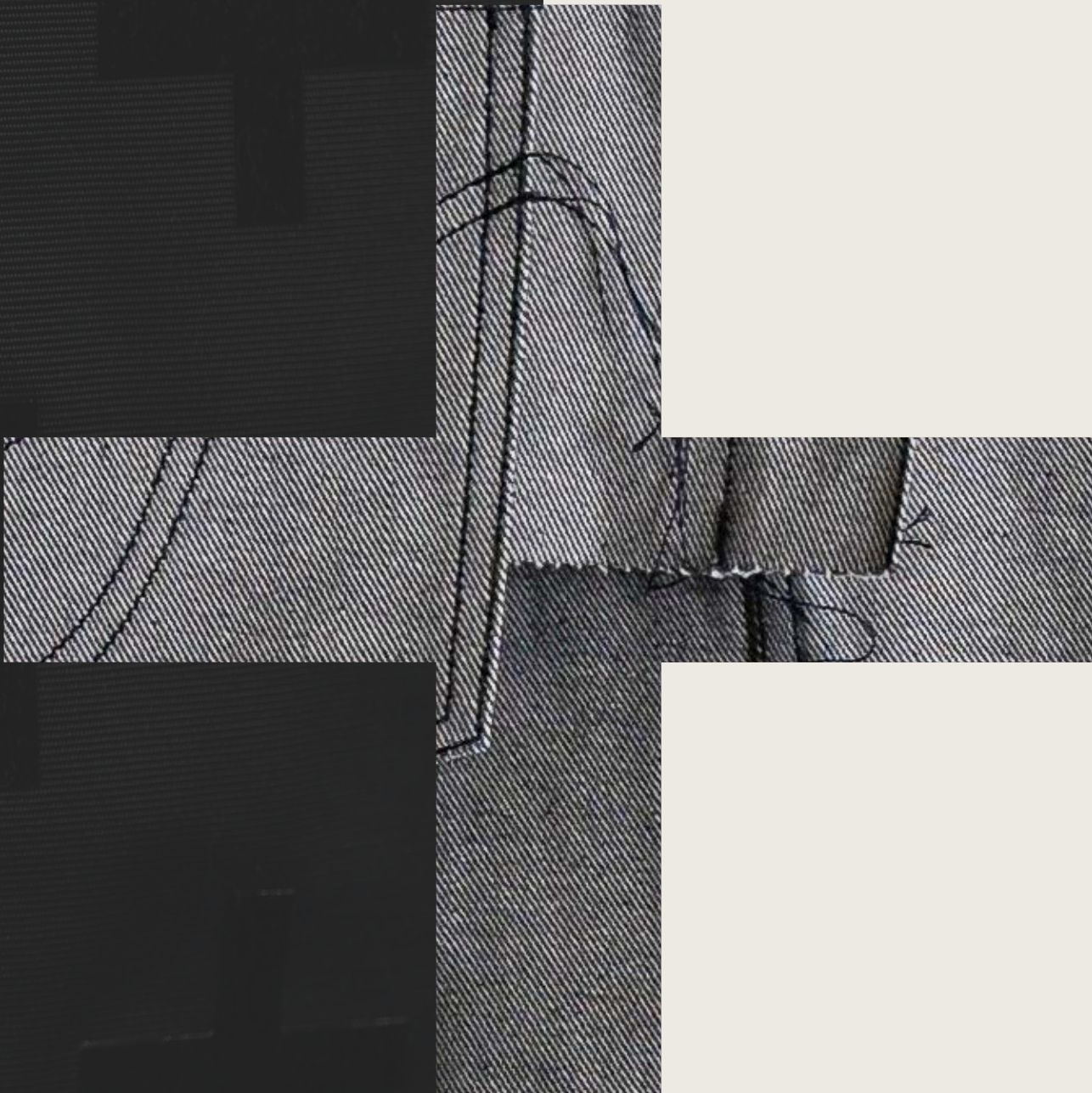
Evelina Dragūnienė Edita Tamosiūnienė

Vilnius
Academy
of Arts



Jeans:

Secular Uniform
or a Modern
Spiritual Artefact?



Jeans, as a universal item of clothing, undoubtedly occupy an important place in contemporary society, transcending their purely utilitarian function. This article analyzes the phenomenon of jeans by discussing their potential role both as a secular uniform and as a cultural artefact, based on existing discourses in sociology, cultural studies, and fashion theory.

This idea became central to understanding jeans as a field where the language of fashion intersects with religious symbolism. We hypothesize that jeans in contemporary culture function similarly to a religious system, with recognizable artefacts, cherished relics, recurring rituals, and even “sacred” journeys. Consequently, a piece of clothing becomes not only a means of protection, but also a kind of chronicle—a fabric on which personal experiences and signs of identity are recorded. Furthermore, the utilitarian elements of jeans—rivets, strong seams, and natural fabrics—take on symbolic meaning, reflecting strength and unbroken connection.

Keywords: phenomenon of jeans, cultural artefact, secular uniform, spiritual artefacts, reflection of identity.

The Evolution of Jeans: From Workwear to Universal Symbol

Jeans, as one of the most universal symbols of contemporary fashion, reflect a unique narrative of social mobility and cultural transformation. Although their utilitarian origins are beyond doubt—created in the mid-19th century for American workers, cowboys, and gold prospectors—today they function as a complex cultural artefact whose meaning has evolved from a marker of social status to a universal “secular uniform.” This article analyzes, based on sociological and fashion theory, how jeans have become both a tool for uniting contemporary society and a means of expressing individuality.

The original function of jeans was clearly defined. According to fashion historian Jennifer Craik, they were an “anti-fashion” phenomenon, designed for functionality rather than aesthetics. The sturdy denim fabric, copper rivets, and strong seams were a direct response to the needs of strenuous physical labor. Early jeans thus functioned as a social marker, identifying individuals belonging to the working class. Jeans signified hard work, practicality, and a certain marginalization in the fashion hierarchy. As Thomas Stege Bojer and Josh Sims note, “before Marlon Brando appeared in theaters wearing Levi’s 501 jeans, <...> jeans were worn almost exclusively by the working class.”¹

By the mid-20th century, this narrative began to change. Influenced by subcultures—especially youth subcultures—jeans took on a new symbolic meaning. This is particularly evident in Marlon Brando’s *The Wild One* (1953) and James Dean’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), where jeans became a symbol of rebellion, freedom, and independence. In his semiotic study of fashion, Roland Barthes argued that clothing functions as a system of signs in which “imaginary clothing”² acquires ideological meaning. In this context, jeans became not only a fabric but also a manifesto of the values of the younger generation, directed against the established order and the conformism of their parents’ generation.

Over several decades, jeans lost their rebellious symbolism and gradually became incorporated into mass culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the emergence of designer jeans, they entered the realm of high fashion, becoming a symbol of luxury and status. This marked a decisive turning point, showing that jeans could be universally adapted and tailored to different social classes.

If purple was the color of royalty, indigo is the color of the people. That is why so many sectors of society—men and women, laborers and intellectuals—have discovered and adopted jeans. They are all unified by a love of the denim fabric and its color—a love of how it is made, how it feels and performs, and what it signifies.³

Today, jeans have definitively become a “secular uniform”—a garment that dissolves social differences. Sociologist Joanne Entwistle argues that in modern society, uniforms are not strictly defined but rather manifest themselves as certain “dress codes”⁴ that allow people to belong to a community while leaving room for individual choice. Jeans fit this definition perfectly, as they are worn all over the world regardless of social class, age, gender, or profession. Although they belong to the same category, they allow individuals to personalize their look through different cuts, shades, wear marks, and accessories. The versatility of jeans enables them to function as a kind of social “lingua franca” that transcends cultural and economic barriers.

1 Thomas Stege Bojer and Josh Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 182.

2 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 125.

3 Bojer and Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture*, 2.

4 Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 75.

The phenomenon of jeans shows that the “fashion system”⁵ works not only by creating differences but also by eliminating them. Today, jeans blur the lines between gender and age, connecting bankers and students, artists and construction workers—as a form of invisible and universal clothing that allows everyone to feel modern, free, and individual, while simultaneously part of a connected society.

Jeans: A Chronicle of Personal Experiences and Identity

If we believe that the “secular uniform” reflects the universality of jeans and their ability to unite different social classes, then jeans, as a cultural artefact, also reveal their deeper, personal significance. Three essential elements contribute to the transformation of jeans into a personal artefact: fabric, rivets, and seams. These components, which initially served a purely utilitarian purpose, have acquired symbolic meaning over time.

The strength and durability of denim fabric, also known as denim, are its defining physical characteristics, allowing jeans to become a unique “chronicle.” Unlike fast fashion products, jeans age along with their owner, accumulating layers of experience and acquiring a distinctive patina. Signs of wear—such as faded areas on the thighs, tears at the knees, and natural creases at the back—are not considered defects but rather unique and irreplaceable marks. Their aesthetic value is examined in art history and fashion theory, emphasizing that these marks testify to authenticity and personal experience. Philosopher Walter Benjamin,⁶ writing about the aura of a work of art, argued that the uniqueness of the original lies in its history and authenticity. Similarly, worn jeans acquire a spiritual quality; they are not only mass-produced products but also unique artefacts inevitably linked to the life of a particular person. This is why denimheads always prefer untreated “raw” jeans over pre-faded designer products.

5 Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 1983

6 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 220.

For most denimheads, it is not only about how you look, it is about how you got the look: the months, years, or even decades you spent breaking in your jeans. This means there are a lot of emotions tangled up in the garment. It is about personal and authentic storytelling, which is essentially the heart of heritage fashion.⁷

Looking at another element of jeans—rivets, patented by Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss⁸ in 1873—they were originally designed to reinforce pockets. Over time, rivets and the characteristic orange stitching have also become symbols of resistance, durability, and reliability. From a sociological perspective, these elements reflect not only physical strength but also psychological resilience. This underscores the ability of jeans to withstand the test of time, much like human character or relationships. Jeans that “serve” for many years become not just a piece of clothing but a faithful companion, bearing witness to a person’s experiences and transformations.

Rituals and Identity Formation

Wearing jeans involves certain rituals that reinforce their status as artefacts. It starts with the “breaking in” process, when new, stiff jeans adapt to the shape of the body. Later, it involves personal “care” rituals, such as special washing—or, conversely, avoiding washing—to highlight their unique wear marks. These actions constitute a kind of personal artistic process, during which the owner “creates” their own unique version of jeans. According to fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle,⁹ jeans are a constant “performance.” They serve not only a practical function but also a social one, allowing the wearer to communicate their identity and membership in a community while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from it.

One notable subculture that shaped the denim cult is the community known as “Denimheads.” This group operates according to principles surprisingly similar to those of a religious congregation. Its members profess a unique system of values centered on the cult of raw and selvedge denim. Such jeans are symbols of authenticity, quality, and devotion to denim. Raw and selvedge jeans are woven from heavier, denser fabric, enabling them to last longer and fade more beautifully.¹⁰

⁷ Bojer and Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture*, 171.

⁸ James Sullivan, *Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), 42.

⁹ Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*.

¹⁰ Bojer and Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture*, 170.

Jeans and Religious Analogies

Having discussed jeans as a “secular uniform” and a “cultural artefact,” it is worth exploring further, highlighting analogies between the phenomenon of denim and religious systems. This unconventional perspective allows us to better understand why jeans hold such deep symbolic and emotional value in contemporary culture. When talking about jeans, it is reasonable to borrow terms from religious language—artefacts, relics, rituals, and sacred journeys.

In religion, artefacts are objects that transcend materiality and acquire spiritual or symbolic meaning. Jeans can be considered such secular artefacts. As noted earlier, Walter Benjamin argued that the “aura of a work of art”¹¹ lies in its unique history and authenticity. Similarly, new jeans have no “spiritual” value when first purchased; over time, however, they acquire a unique aura through wear and experience. Each mark, tear, or fade functions like a personal “prayer” or record, endowing jeans with a sacred, personally cherished value.

Worn Jeans as Relics

Every religious system has its own founding myth and central relic. Although jeans are not holy relics, they act as personal relics. Worn-out, faded jeans that have accompanied us through important life events—a first date, a trip, a concert—become witnesses to our personal history. They function as material memories imbued with emotional weight. In the cosmology of jeans, this role is played by Levi’s 501 model, created in 1873. It is considered not only an icon of jeans of all time, but also the “Father”—the original artefact that initiated the entire era. In 1997, legendary American designer Bill Blass remarked, “No designer has ever created anything comparable to the influence of blue five-pocket jeans.”¹²

The Levi’s company blog mentions that some denimheads wish to be buried wearing Levi’s 501 jeans. They are like sacred garments, akin to the Tourin Shroud guiding the way on the final journey. “This is the true story of hundreds of dearly departed who’ve requested to be buried in their 501® jeans. And the one unliving legend that requested all attendees wear them, too.”¹³

11 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 220.

12 *The Rebel’s Wardrobe. The Untold Story of Menswear’s Renegade Past* (Cologne: Gestalten, 2022), 12.

13 Levi’s, interactive, accessed September 30, 2024, www.levi.com/LT/en/features/greatest-story-ever-worn?srsId=AfmBOOpBwfzCAPDHfxkn-Hv0OnZBeAkL5SOzsqMXO1OrvyULueu9LJSI.

The 1944 Levi's 501s model holds a special historical significance. Due to limited resources during the war, the manufacturer was forced to paint the iconic arched seam on the back pockets by hand in order to preserve its important symbolic value. Produced for only nine months, this model became one of the rarest and most sought-after relics among collectors.¹⁴

The Rituals of Wearing Jeans

Religious rituals are repetitive actions designed to maintain contact with spiritual forces. Similar rituals exist in the world of jeans. For example, the “breaking-in” ritual¹⁵ involved deliberately wearing new, stiff jeans for an extended period so that they adapt to the shape of the body and acquire unique creases and fades. This process is almost meditative, requiring patience and dedication. Denimheads may even avoid washing jeans for months or years to preserve the authentic texture and color of the fabric—a ritual akin to protecting a “sacred” object in order to maintain its “purity” and uniqueness.

Some denimheads follow almost religious rituals when wearing and washing (or not washing) their jeans, and preach the laws of the unwritten denim bible to any savage who washes their jeans every week.¹⁶

There is also the phenomenon of pilgrimages, such as trips to Japan, considered the “holy land” of jeans. When jeans production in America became increasingly mass-oriented and geared toward fast fashion in the 1970s, the Japanese, driven by meticulousness and respect for craftsmanship characteristic of their culture, set out to recreate the quality of early Levi's and Lee jeans. Japanese manufacturers weave the fabric on antique shuttle looms with the iconic red selvedge. The creations of legendary manufacturers—Iron Heart, Samurai, Momotaro—recreate historical Levi's and Lee models and are considered by denimheads to be the benchmark of authenticity—a kind of Holy Grail. Japan is now the center of denim craftsmanship, and its selvedge and raw denim are regarded as the most authentic, almost sacred form of jeans—a modern relic that preserves the spirit of the original era.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bojer and Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture*, 231.

¹⁵ Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*.

¹⁶ Bojer and Sims, *Blue Blooded: Denim Hunters and Jeans Culture*, 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In fashion and denim culture, these trips have taken on a new form. They may involve visits to specialty stores such as the Levi's Museum in San Francisco, antique shops, or one of the most famous vintage denim flea markets, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, in search of truly authentic jeans. For many years, this flea market has served as a sacred meeting place for jeans enthusiasts from all over the world.¹⁸

These "sacred journeys" are not only acts of buying and selling, but also a kind of pilgrimage in search of origins, authenticity, rarity, and connection to the history of jeans. They reflect a deeper desire to become part of a larger cultural narrative and to obtain material proof of "holiness."

In summary, the phenomenon of jeans transcends the boundaries of fashion and sociology, taking on a spiritual dimension. Jeans function as spiritual artefacts and treasured relics, and wearing them involves rituals and "sacred journeys." These religious analogies allow us to better understand why jeans have become not only ubiquitous items of clothing but also a powerful symbol of personal identity and cultural connection.

Creative Impulse

This artistic study delves into the phenomenon of jeans as a unique intersection between fashion and religion, where symbolic elements connect cultures and identities. The relationship with clothing expressed in the work goes far beyond a simple contact between fabric and body. It is a material reflection of existence, through which a person carries and testifies to their presence in the world [Fig. 1]. Jeans, adapting to the shape of the body, acquire traces of the wearer's life over time, becoming a second skin that records everyday life, experiences, and even emotional states.

From a philosophical perspective, jeans can be understood as a material object with spiritual significance, conveying an individual's relationship with the modern world. As Roland Barthes¹⁹ points out, clothing is not only functional but also a semiotic system through which social meanings are communicated. In a world where gods have quietly stepped aside and been replaced by screens, logistics, and routine, people are still looking for signs—objects that reveal the presence of spirituality. Jeans are not merely fabric; they are a time capsule that absorbs life habits, movements, and fatigue. Just as ancient relics bore the traces of saints, jeans preserve our inclinations, our personal secrets, falls, and resurrections. They fade and tear, but they do not disappear—they always bear witness.

18 Ibid., 213.

19 Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 1983.

Art Installation

Denim has always been something unquestionable, constant, and eternal for us. While researching its history, we discovered many fascinating moments—from the first workers' clothing to contemporary cultural icons, from ritual wearing habits to fan communities that perceive jeans almost as objects of faith. For those of us in the fashion world, jeans are a religion. Ideas for artistic expression arose intuitively and organically, combining newly discovered knowledge with personal, long-felt experiences. Thus, the “sacred” elements—material, seams, and rivets—came together in a form that tells the story of our faith in jeans.

In our art installation, we deconstruct jeans and turn them into a collection of metaphors. By removing the usual blue color and returning the fabric to its unwashed state, we invite the viewer to interpret the piece. Indigo dye is symbolically associated with mass production and industrial manufacturing, so by rejecting color, we create a connection with sustainability. Unwashed denim, “unadapted” to mass consumption, symbolizes an untouched state, reminiscent of human incompleteness and growth potential. It is a rejection of conformism and a choice to follow one's own unique creative path, regardless of the pressures of fast fashion.

The rivets used in the work have acquired symbolic status: they mark points of strength, durability, and resistance. Visually, they resemble connections between different parts of the fabric, analogous to points of interaction between social, cultural, or personal experiences in human life. The rivets are like our inner points of support that prevent us from falling apart in difficult situations. They act as essential structural elements, ensuring the integrity of a garment, just as our values and principles support the strength of our identity.



The denim seams convey the unbroken connection between past and present, between tradition and modernity. The open seams left in our work speak of conscious incompleteness—a creative process without a final form that constantly allows us to rethink our place in the world. These open spaces on the fabric become like open diary pages, inviting the viewer to become a co-creator and imagine their own story. The work emphasizes that true beauty lies not in perfect form, but in constant transformation.

When interpreting jeans today, we present them not only as an item of clothing but also as a meditative reminder of humanity's connection with the world. They encourage reflection on the past, present, and future, inviting us to rethink our identity through a material that, at first glance, seems mundane but conceals a complex cultural, social, and spiritual structure. In this sense, jeans become a relic that does not belong on altars but lives on the streets, in concert halls, and in the lives of ordinary people. They are everyday heroes, quietly carrying personal and collective history.

Reflection

In summary, jeans are a multifaceted phenomenon that resists easy categorization. They embody the paradox of modernity. On the one hand, they function as a global, secular uniform that levels differences. On the other, they serve as deeply personal, spiritual artefacts, testifying to the individual's search for identity, physicality, and freedom. In a secularizing and multicultural society, where traditional religious symbols are losing their significance, everyday objects such as jeans are assuming the role of cultural relics, safeguarding not only individual but also collective memory. Thus, it is reasonable to analyze jeans as one of the most influential relics of modern textiles.

Bio

Evelina Dragūnienė is a fashion and graphic designer, and a lecturer at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, with over 20 years of experience in industrial fashion design. She participates in various projects as a graphic designer and stylist.

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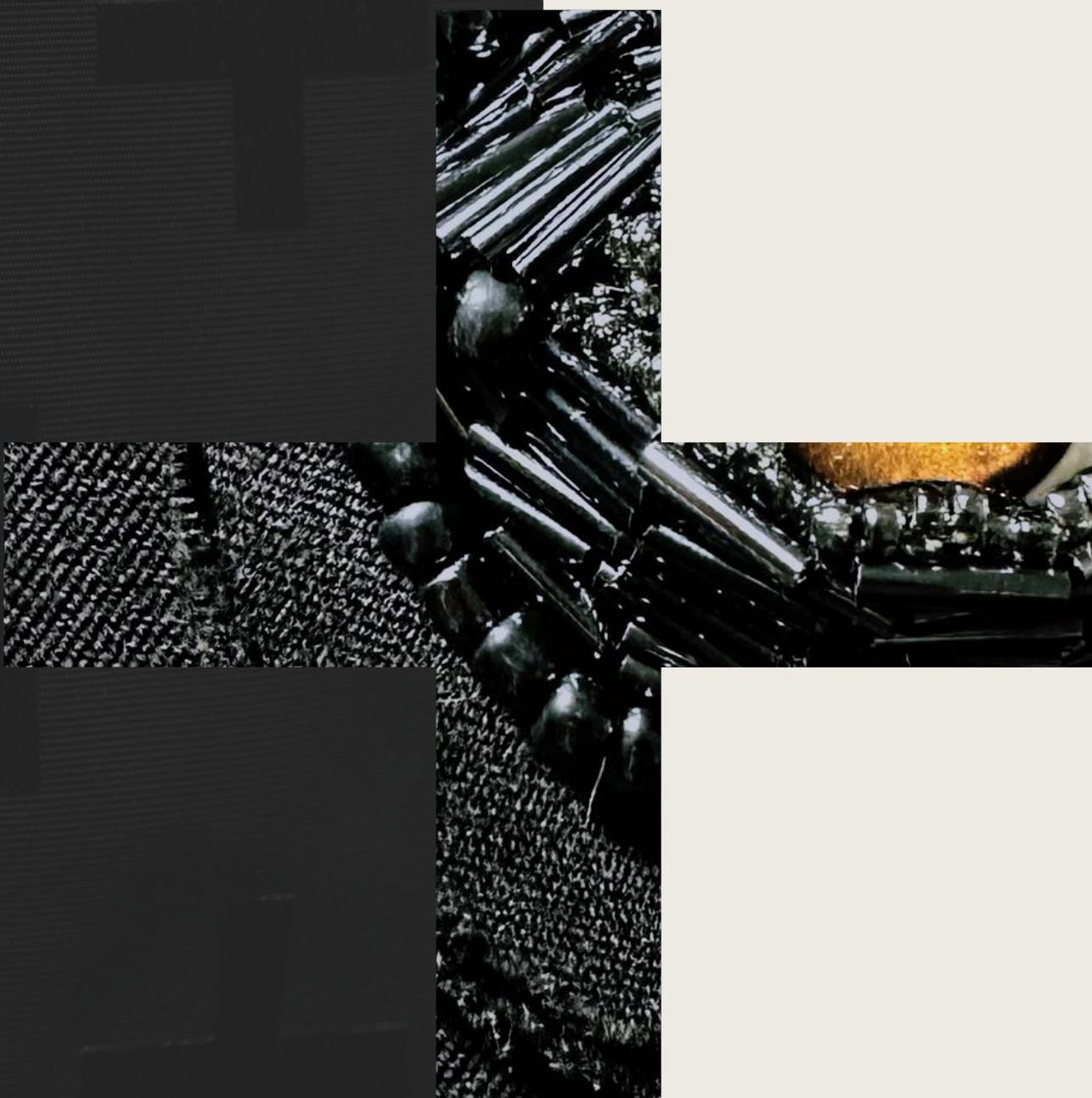


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Deep Forest



Abstract

There are places where the history loops and replays itself according to a fixed scenario. Such a place is the Białowieża Forest, whose majestic nature, confronted with human defencelessness, became the starting point for my inspiration.

There, the borderland is about more than just a nexus of cultures. It is an exceptional place where the sublime collides with brutality, and the trivial with the spiritual. My attention was drawn to the contrast between the revelations of Orthodox icons taking place in the forest and the difficult realities of people wandering through the same forest. These two universes coexist and intertwine into a single story.

Although this topic has been very close to my heart for several years, I am still trying to define its scope. I experience strong, authentic emotions, yet they are fleeting, and a deeper understanding of them remains beyond my reach. Therefore, I decided to explore its essence through nonverbal means. My project has a borderline nature, suspended between the worlds of the sacred and the profane; it is a compilation of typical, comfortable sportswear with elements of the attire of saints.

Keywords: sacrum and profanum, revelations of holy icons, borderline experience, symbols of faith, Białowieża Forest, border zone.

There are places where the history is stuck in a loop and replays itself following a fixed scenario. Such a place is the Białowieża Forest, with its ruthless and majestic nature contrasting with human defencelessness, which has become a starting point for my project for the Costumes & Contemplation on Religion exhibition at the Central Textile Museum in Łódź in 2024.

There, the borderland is more than just a nexus of cultures. The Białowieża Forest is an exceptional place where the sublime collides with brutality, and the trivial with the spiritual. Crossing the threshold of the forest, we sense an abstract presence that cannot be expressed in words alone.

"It is as if those who lie here help those who walk."¹ These words by Wojciech Koronkiewicz describe the clash between the worlds of the sacred and the profane in Podlasie. His observations drew my attention to the contrast between the revelations of Orthodox icons said to occur in the forest (sacred) and the harsh realities faced by those wandering through the same forest (profane). These two universes coexist and intertwine into a single story.

¹ Wojciech Koronkiewicz, *Nie zbiera się jabłek z tego sadu. Podróż do grobów, duchów i ukrytych skarbów Podlasia* (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Paśny Buriat, 2022), 142.

I. Białowieża Forest

The nature

The Białowieża Forest, Europe's last naturally grown primeval forest, has represented Poland on the UNESCO World Heritage List for over forty years.² It is a source of national pride, attracting researchers and nature lovers from around the world. The forest's uniqueness lies in its extraordinary biodiversity, including the free-ranging European bison, a symbol of the Białowieża Forest.³

The Białowieża Forest consists of seven types, ranging from difficult-to-access swamp forests to dense coniferous woods, interspersed with meadows, clearings, and river valleys.⁴ Between them lie ecotones—transitional zones neighbouring ecosystems meet, forming mixtures of environments and the unique formations that appear within them.⁵

Ecotones are fascinating places: they are buffers proving that hard boundaries are established exclusively by people. Instead of sharp divisions, nature favours flexible, variable, and dynamic patterns oriented toward the formation of multi-layered structures. The word *ecotone* comes from Greek (*oikos* = home, household + *tónos* = tension) and combines the ideas of *household* and *tension*, thus referring to various kinds of neighbourhood conflict.⁶

The characteristic features of ecotones—the richness and specificity of their components, as well as the constant friction at the interface of conflicting zones—perfectly describe the uniqueness of Poland's borderland. Just like the Białowieża Forest, Podlasie has resisted rigid geopolitical frontiers between states and instead constitutes a transitional area between the cultures of the East and the West. Its location at the crossroads of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as different languages, means that culture here, like nature in ecotones, generates its own unique, multi-layered structures.

2 "Puszcza Białowieża – UNESCO," *Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot*, <https://puszcza.pracownia.org.pl/puszcza-bialowieska/unesco>.

3 "Puszcza Białowieża," *WWF Polska*, <https://www.wwf.pl/srodowisko/lasy/puszcza-bialowieska>.

4 "Drzewostany Puszczy Białowieżskiej," https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drzewostany_Puszczy_Bia%C5%82owieskiej.

5 "Ekoton," *Encyklopedia Leśna*, <https://encyklopedialesna.com/haslo/ekoton/>.

6 Ewa Zwierzyńska, *Podlaska mozaika. Reportaże z rajów – krainy błota i mgły* (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Paśny Buriat, 2022), 30.

Borderland culture

In folk culture, the border organizes the world: it separates territories, but it also serves as a point of contact between them, allowing for communication and dialogue. The spaces between villages—as well as rivers, roads, doorsteps, and forest strips—are border zones, no-man’s lands considered dangerous because their nature and affiliation remain ambiguous.⁷ According to local belief, in border zones or liminal moments, contact with the sacred can occur through rituals. Without proper protection, however, a human being becomes exposed to destructive forces. For locals, any object or creature that escapes folk classification and is located in the border zone is a threat to their status quo.⁸

The inhabitants of the borderland are mainly Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, who nevertheless describe themselves as “locals,” identifying above all with their small homeland of Podlasie.⁹ Their identity is shaped mainly by the Orthodox faith, as well as by the beliefs and traditions rooted in local religiosity. Unlike Western Christianity, Eastern Christianity has a sensual character. Western culture, drawing on the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato, recognized the superiority of sight as the most perfect of the senses because of its purely intellectual nature.¹⁰ In Eastern Orthodoxy, however, all the senses are involved in religious experience, so that it extends beyond the purely spiritual to encompass physical sensations, such as the smell of myrrh, the taste of the sacraments, or the sound of the choir’s voices.¹¹ Faith is experienced not only internally but also externally, by looking for its aspects in other beings, in the surrounding reality, and in direct contact with it.¹²

In folk culture, the world is perceived through oppositions. Good and evil, light and shadow, east and west, and above all, the sacred and the profane coexist. This dualism, derived from folk mythology, ensures order and balance. The sacred, opposed to the secular reality, is a sphere of holiness and spirituality.¹³ Its presence may be revealed in any place, object, or person that, through ritual, acquires sacred qualities. The experience of the sacred means encountering omnipotence, which has an ambivalent character.¹⁴ On the one hand, it is linked with fascination, and on the other, with fear and mystery.

The Orthodox faith and local traditions significantly influence how the world is perceived in Podlasie. According to local belief, objects and places are endowed with magical, even causative, power. Local folk mythology features the carving of the Tree of Life, which connects the underworld with the earth and the heavens. This alludes to Christianity and the unique role of trees, which accompanied Christ in the most important moments of his life.¹⁵ The proximity of majestic nature, and above all, symbolic ancient trees, stimulates the imagination

7 Ewelina Sadanowicz, *Szeptuchy. Religijność ludowa na Podlasiu* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2024), 71.

8 Ibid., 72.

9 Ibid., 23.

10 Sadanowicz, *Szeptuchy*, 46.

11 Ibid., 46.

12 Ibid., 52.

13 Ibid., 67.

14 Ibid., 67.

15 Ibid., 69.

and allows what is deeply profane to merge with the sacred. In the predominantly Orthodox Podlasie region, icons are venerated, and according to folk legends, they sometimes appear to chosen individuals on trees or in river currents. Images of saints are not only merely representations but personifications of the holy figures themselves.¹⁶ Their presence—above all, the closeness of the Virgin Mary—is connected to the sensual, haptic nature of religious experience. This experience cannot be analyzed in purely rational terms, yet stories of revelations of icons, and of saints themselves, take shape as vivid parables.¹⁷

II. Research question

Icons on trees

It is the Virgin Mary who most often visits the faithful. She usually appears on linden or pear trees—species associated with feminine energy due to their high reproductive capacity.¹⁸ Wherever an icon appears, the sacred finds its place. Podlasie's Mothers of God, such as the Hodyszewska, Our Lady of Solace of Krypno, and Our Lady of Kożany, have each been honoured with small or large shrines built in gratitude for their miracles.

It is difficult for me to imagine that unbelievably sensual and haptic experience of the faithful in Podlasie, yet it captures my imagination most powerfully. I have often wondered what icons might look like when they appear on trees. Do they take the form of a framed painting, a finished icon? Or does the sacredness of an icon manifest itself abstractly, perhaps as an intense, bright colour against the backdrop of a dull forest? Is it the Virgin Mary herself, perched like a bird on a branch? Perhaps she is gazing down upon those traversing the forest's inaccessible trails?

Small shrines emerge in the wilderness and forests of Podlasie—memorials to victims of numerous conflicts that erupted along the ever-sparking border. The forest is full of stark contrasts: it is beautiful but treacherous and dangerous, a paradise for hikers but a hell for illegal immigrants struggling to pass through it. The opposition of the sacred and the profane here extends far beyond the spiritual realm.

Amid the monotonous rustle of trees and the chirping of birds, it is easier to pause and contemplate the fate of those who have remained in the Forest. Some lost their lives at the hands of strangers, others at the hands of neighbours.

¹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷ Sadanowicz, *Szeptuchy*, 67.

¹⁸ Zwierzyńska, *Podlaska mozaika*, 230.

In the places of ruthless crime, beside shrines, burial mounds, and crosses, an atmosphere of horror and darkness prevails. People still walk those same trails today. Among the trees on which the local Mothers of God once appeared, in the ecotones, alongside ancient oaks and European bison, walk strangers who elude the classifications of the local population. Burdened by uncertainty, they live under constant threat; some lose their lives in the harsh, swampy areas of the forest. They leave behind small mementos, exotic amulets (like the hand of Fatima) believed to bring the good fortune that they never found.

Does the Virgin Mary still appear in trees? Can anyone still count on her grace?

While working on the *Deep Forest* project, my goal was to convey the complexity of the mystical experiences encountered in the Białowieża Forest and Podlasie. These experiences are partly disharmonious, blending elation with sublimity. Their diverse emotional tones make them difficult to capture and describe.

III. The creative process

Podlasie—and Białowieża in particular—is always on my radar. My phone overflows with photographs of the Białowieża Forest, roadside shrines, and lush reed beds. The shelves in my Warsaw apartment are crowded with books about the culture and people of Podlasie. Its borderline nature makes it elusive, and that elusiveness keeps it incredibly interesting and captivating. Although the subject has been close to my heart for years, it remains difficult for me to express it in words, to define its scope. This is why I chose to explore its essence through nonverbal means.

I revisited my photographs that are illustrative for the purpose and were taken in the forest during different seasons: in full bloom, dormant in autumn, or hostile in winter. I returned to my earlier collages and drawings pertaining to this subject, gathered in my sketchbook, which include depictions of the Virgin Mary, reed beds along the Narewka River, and the forest itself. I also incorporated graphic materials, mainly drawn from the books I had been reading, which evoked powerful emotional responses. By combining all these visual materials, I sought to illustrate my thoughts and trace the connections and interdependencies between them. Out of this process, strong contrasts emerged—a crucial element of the broadly understood landscape of Podlasie. The opposition of the sacred and the profane, reflected in so many aspects, became the core of my inspiration.

I. Clothing

The first important aspect of the Deep Forest and Podlasie culture is clothing, which in fact is the subject of this project. Proper clothing, well-suited to the demanding conditions of the forest, is essential. This includes full-length, sporty garments such as hooded sweatshirts, sweatpants, and sports jackets, which enable safe movement through the forest. In such contexts, function takes precedence over aesthetics.

Naturally, these rules do not apply to the Virgin Mary, who appears on trees, wearing decorative robes and a crown, as befits a figure from the sacred world.

My idea was to combine forms and elements characteristic of both realities by juxtaposing functional elements of clothing with purely aesthetic features. Therefore, the main element of the composition is the headgear, reminiscent of both saints' scarves and nuns' veils. The upper part of the garment is a typically utilitarian sports knit sweatshirt with a large hood, its shape echoing the hood of a habit. Draped over the shoulders is a cape, aesthetically evoking saints' scarves and nuns' veils. The voluminous skirt, forming the lower part of the styled look, is reminiscent of the robes of saints, yet like the sweatshirt it is made of looped knit fabric, allowing freedom of movement. The entire styled look has a liminotrope character, suspended between the worlds of the sacred and the profane.

II. Faith-related symbols and decorations

The border region is home primarily to Christians, mainly Orthodox, but also to Muslims, Jews, and followers of other faiths who pass through the territory. Podlasie is a melting pot of cultures and religions, which is why another important element of the project focuses on symbols of faith. The first is the eye—a cross-cultural symbol of God—appearing here in the form of beaded jewellery. Another is the eye in the palm of a hand, known as the Hand of Fatima, which symbolizes divine protection found in many cultures around the world. I incorporated the Hand of Fatima into my own design as a seamless repeat pattern printed on the cape. Black beads, used as a symbolic detail, recall both the rosary and the string with evenly tied knots, integrated into the blouse and skirt.

III. The nature

The nature of the Białowieża Forest has two faces. Idyllic landscapes contrast with a dark, naturalistic reality captivating with its majesty and power. Holy icons, too, have been said to appear in the waters of Podlasie rivers—sometimes calm, at other times swift. For the project, I created a custom print based on my photograph of reed beds along the Narewka River. Cotton tapes applied to the sleeves of the sweatshirt evoke plants swaying with the rhythm of the river current, resembling the stripes found on sportswear, though here they are spacious and tangled. The river itself is small, but during thaws and rains it spreads into wide floodplains, turning treacherous and dangerous.

Bio

Adrianna Grudzinska-Pham holds a PhD in Fine Arts and is a lecturer at the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where she leads the Fashion Design Studio for bachelor's students. She is a director of fashion and light shows and an enthusiast of combining design with fine arts, the tangible with the ephemeral. Her doctoral research explored haptic imagination and the integration of sensory perception in clothing design.



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List of Illustrations

- 1. The process of embroidering a headpiece detail.
- 2. The process of creating a moodboard from photos and sketches.









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Textile as a Site of Memory:

Artistic Research
through Reused
Domestic Fabric



Abstract

This article examines the artistic research project *Rose Garden*, in which textile functions as a carrier of both collective and individual memory, and the repurposed garment becomes a form of critical reflection and a commentary on visual culture. Created from old, moth-eaten floral headscarves once worn by women of previous generations, the project activates the cultural meanings embedded in past textiles and brings them into dialogue with present-day concerns. At the center of the artistic practice stands the garment as metaphor: the resulting bomber jacket becomes a “uniform of peace,” a relic of memory, and a form of performative testimony. The creative process interweaves lived experience, historical memory, and religious practice—particularly the rosary, which during Soviet oppression functioned as a form of spiritual resistance and survival. The article explores not only the material transformation of textile but also its capacity to store and transmit meaning. The project proposes understanding fashion as a discursive practice capable of opening new ways of interpreting history, identity, and memory.

Keywords: textile, memory, artistic research, garment as metaphor, rosary, Soviet oppression, reuse.

Introduction and Theoretical Context

Textile, as a material of culture and everyday life, has long been intertwined with memory, identity, and collective narratives. It not only covers the body or shapes interior spaces but also embodies values, rituals, and social relations. A seemingly ordinary object—a floral headscarf—can thus become a dense archive of histories, emotions, and personal recollections.

94 The artistic research project *Rose Garden* emerges from this understanding of textile as a vessel of memory, a material in which biographical layers, collective experiences, and cultural symbols accumulate. By reworking inherited fabric and transforming it into a bomber jacket, the project seeks to reactivate a disappearing tradition of floral headscarves and to reflect on the complexity of Lithuanian historical memory.

The notion of the rosary is central to the conceptual framing of this work. The word *rosary* derives from the Latin *rosarium*, meaning “rose garden.” In medieval Christian practice, knights pledged fidelity to the Virgin Mary by offering roses or “spiritual garlands”—prayers recited as devotional acts. Religious texts frequently describe the rosary as a spiritual weapon, recounting numerous episodes of protection or miraculous deliverance through prayer. During the Soviet occupation, when religion was marginalized and devotional practices were suppressed, the rosary gained particular resonance in Lithuania. Elderly women—grandmothers who had often experienced deportation or suffered other forms of Soviet violence—became the custodians of this tradition. Gathering in churches and adorned with their finest floral headscarves, they recited the rosary and transmitted the words and gestures of prayer to their grandchildren. Their persistent presence, the preservation of ritual, and the quiet continuity of faith formed a subtle yet powerful mode of resistance—neither confrontational nor overt, but grounded in inner resilience and survival.

Within this context, textile acquires particular symbolic weight. Floral headscarves, once markers of femininity and piety, are now becoming rare, fading alongside the generation of women who wore them. Their materiality functions not only as evidence of individual lives but also as part of a broader cultural landscape in which fabric becomes a “witness”, silently holding the imprint of past experiences. Pierre Nora (1989) describes such objects as *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory that extend beyond monuments or physical spaces to include everyday artifacts capable of embodying collective remembrance. The headscarf, as a domestic textile, serves precisely this function: it carries time, gestures, and bodies no longer present, yet still inscribed within its fibers.

In the *Rose Garden* project, the transformation of old scarves into a bomber jacket becomes both an aesthetic and a conceptual gesture. The bomber—an icon of contemporary fashion with origins in military uniform—here becomes a “uniform of peace,” symbolically opposing narratives of war, violence, and oppression. This gesture gains particular resonance in the current context of Russia’s war against Ukraine. A garment historically associated with power and masculine force is reconstructed from a fragile, feminine textile that once sheltered the heads of praying women, producing a paradoxical and layered meaning. Such an approach reflects what Julia Bryan-Wilson² terms a “performative politics of materiality,” in which artistic actions transform not only objects but also our relationship to history.

1 Assmann, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

2 Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Understanding textile as a site of memory opens a path toward investigating its material, sensory, emotional, and political dimensions. Mary Douglas³ highlights how materials shape cultural categories of purity, order, and disorder. Reused textile—marked by time, moth damage, and wear—thus becomes a metaphor for the ways societies handle memory: what is preserved, discarded, or rewritten. This creative strategy extends beyond design or craft, functioning as a critical commentary on the mechanisms of cultural production.

Ultimately, *Rose Garden* examines the intersection of fashion, religion, and history, positioning the garment as a tool of representation and resistance. The repetitive act of tying rosary knots mirrors the creative process itself—slow, meditative, and attentive to time, the body, community, and ritual. In this artistic research, the garment operates both as a designed object and an epistemological instrument, enabling reflection on traumatic history and offering new ways to think about material culture as a carrier of memory.

Creative Practice as a Method for Memory Research

Rose Garden developed from a desire to understand how textile can serve both as a material object and as a method for exploring, reflecting on, and transmitting forms of collective and individual memory. The project culminated in an interdisciplinary installation presented in a solo exhibition, combining textile works, spatial compositions, scent, video, and poetry. It rests on the premise that artistic practice can function as a research method—one that does not merely illustrate historical facts but reveals their sensory, emotional, and symbolic layers.

The creative process began with the material itself: old, used, time-worn, and moth-damaged floral headscarves. Although they no longer held functional or aesthetic value, their very “undesirability” endowed them with conceptual significance. The headscarves carried “traces of time”—lingering scents, marks of wear, and shifts in texture that acted as material witnesses to past lives and the women who once wore them. This approach resonates with scholars of material culture who view objects as “time capsules” that do not simply reflect but embody history.⁴

3 Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1966.

4 Hoskins, Janet. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

These collected headscarves were transformed into several installation elements distributed across three gallery spaces, creating a narrative dramaturgy.

The first space served as an introduction and a catalyst for memory. At its center stood a circle of living roses planted in dark earth—simultaneously evoking deportation grounds, homeland soil, and a freshly heaped grave. This symbolic configuration created a multilayered set of associations: earth as a metaphor for both birth and mortality, and roses as symbols of prayer and offering. A wall featuring a poem by Indrė Valantaitė, alongside an entire surface covered with stitched-together scarves, created an intimate atmosphere that invited visitors into the world of past generations of women.

The second space centered on the project's primary object: a series of bomber jackets. Ten bombers made from the collected headscarves were suspended in a circle, visually referencing rosary beads or a rose garland. The number ten alluded to the structure of the rosary—ten Hail Mary cycles recited in meditative sequence. The bomber, rooted in military history, was reimagined as a “uniform of peace,” embodying quiet resistance and the layered structures of collective memory. Through the acts of sewing, reworking, and recoding form and function, fashion becomes a critical discursive tool that expands the garment's interpretive capacity.

The third space offered the installation's sensory and ritual culmination. One wall was painted a soft pink—an allusion to Marian iconography and the rosary. Hung upon it were dozens of hand-tied rosaries, each perfumed with rose-scented fragrance created specifically for the project by Aistis Mickevičius, founder of the art perfumery brand FUM PAR FUM. As anthropologist Constance Classen⁵ notes, scent is among the strongest triggers of memory, awakening both recollection and embodied states. Its inclusion deepened the multisensory dimension of the installation and extended the project's engagement with memory beyond the visual.

The installation's tripartite structure functioned as a form of spatial dramaturgy, guiding the viewer through three levels of memory: archive, transformation, and ritual. Each room served not only as a *lieu de mémoire* but also as an active gesture—one that moves, transforms, and engages.⁶

The creative process itself was inseparable from the project's methodology. Reworking, sewing, composing, and scent-making operated as deeply felt conceptual gestures, probing how material can carry meaning while simultaneously being transformed yet preserving its historical weight. In this sense, artistic practice becomes a form of “tactile historiography.”

Rose Garden thus prompts a reconsideration of fashion not merely as representation but as inquiry. Here, fashion emerges as an epistemological tool capable of engaging with memory, time, and identity—expanding the field of fashion studies to include critical, material, and embodied dimensions.

5 Classen, Constance. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

6 Nora, Pierre. “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

Conclusions

Rose Garden is an artistic research project that interweaves textile materiality, historical memory, and fashion discourse in order to re-examine the relationship between past materials and their symbolic significance. The garment here is not merely functional or aesthetic; it becomes a critical instrument through which to address identity, trauma, and collective memory. The bomber jacket, made from aged scarves, embodies a paradox: it is simultaneously a contemporary fashion object and a relic of the past, prompting reflection on how cultural memory is preserved, negotiated, and rewritten.

The project demonstrates textile's profound capacity to store past experiences—not only materially but symbolically, conveying values, rituals, and emotions. It functions as an archive inscribed with social, religious, and political histories. The rosary, with its repetitive and ritualized structure, becomes a metaphor for the process of textile reworking—both are acts of collecting, connecting, transforming, and meaning-making. Through this lens, artistic practice expands the field of memory studies by integrating sensory, material, and performative dimensions.

The research also highlights the gendered dynamics of resistance. Although not all women who wore headscarves were religious, their presence in churches, quiet preservation of ritual, and transmission of rosary practice became a form of cultural endurance under Soviet repression. This subtle, often invisible labor of continuity constitutes a political gesture—less a protest than a strategy of survival.

Ultimately, *Rose Garden* proposes a new way of understanding fashion as a form of research—one that moves beyond aesthetics and production to engage with memory, critique contemporary conditions, and envision new possibilities. Textile becomes an archive, a medium through which intimate recollections and collective histories intertwine. In doing so, the project invites fashion studies to move beyond consumerist frames and embrace new critical trajectories in which material, memory, and the body operate as an integrated system of inquiry.



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The Motif of the Rushnyk as a Design Inspiration



Abstract

The article explores the Ukrainian ritual towel—the *rushnyk*—as a source of artistic inspiration and cultural reflection. Rooted in pre-Christian tradition, *rushnyks* fulfill ritual, symbolic, and metaphysical functions, accompanying human life from birth to death. Their linear form reflects the path of life, while embroidered ornaments convey magical and protective meanings. The author reinterprets this heritage through contemporary knitted clothing, translating woven and embroidered bands into jacquard and pleated structures. Two silhouettes—*Rushnyk I* and *Rushnyk II*—embody the act of wrapping the body with knitted panels as a symbolic ritual of entering the sphere of the sacred. Minimal in form yet rich in meaning, the projects merge tradition with modernity. This approach reflects on the dialogue between past and present, matter and body, the sacred and contemporary fashion, presenting tradition not as a burden but as a source of creative energy. The silhouettes were presented at international exhibitions in Łódź (2024) and Vilnius (2025).

Keywords: *rushnyk*, ritual towel, knitwear, knitting technique.

Introduction

I first encountered the motif of the *rushnyk*—the traditional Ukrainian ritual towel—during an artistic plein-air workshop in the Carpathians, in the village of Yavoriv (Ivano-Frankivsk region) in 2017 and 2018. Subsequent visits to the Lviv and Hlyniany regions deepened my understanding of the beauty and uniqueness of Ukrainian traditions. In the Church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit in Yavoriv, I noticed how essential ritual towels are in interior decoration, adorning icons, altars, and doors. It was there that I also heard stories about the rich symbolism and significance of ritual towels from Professor Zenovia Shulha of the National Academy of Arts in Lviv, the organizer of the plein-air workshops. Her words intrigued me and sparked my interest in this subject.

After encountering the *rushnyk* in western Ukraine, I became increasingly fascinated by this tradition. The ritual towel is characteristic of East Slavic folk culture—not only in Ukraine but also in Belarus and Poland. In Poland’s Podlasie region, the ceremonial towel from the Bielsk Podlaski is widely known, and in 2025 it was inscribed on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a traditional element of Podlasie culture.¹ Ceremonial towels have pre-Christian, pagan origins; only later were they used to decorate Christian icons. Today, the tradition is maintained primarily by Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities.²

For me, the *rushnyk* has become not only a point of reference but also the foundation on which I built the artistic concept of this project. In Ukrainian tradition, the *rushnyk* is an object of extraordinary symbolic power—not merely a piece of fabric but a carrier of memory, a magical bridge between the world of the living and the dead, and a medium connecting humans with the sacred dimension. What interests me most is precisely this moment of encounter: the space in which a utilitarian object becomes a symbol, where matter is imbued with protective, ritual, and metaphysical power.

For many years, my artistic explorations have revolved around knitwear and its structural properties. Knitwear offers almost endless possibilities for shaping space while also possessing an organic character—it responds to the body, to movement, and to gravity. In the project inspired by the *rushnyk*, I discovered a unique space for dialogue between tradition and modernity: the embroidered fabric band was reinterpreted through the medium of knitwear, using jacquard technology and pleating, which allowed me to read it anew in the language of contemporary clothing design.

The two realizations, *Rushnyk I* and *Rushnyk II*, thus represent an attempt to build a bridge between the culture of the ancestors and contemporary visual sensibility. They are also a reflection on how structure and ornament can function in the context of clothing—how they can protect, tell stories, and at the same time serve as carriers of pure, minimalist aesthetics rooted in the present.

1 Podlaska Sieć Kultury, “The Bielsk Ritual Towel on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage,” *Podlaska Sieć Kultury*, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://podlaskisenkultury.pl/bielski-recznik-obrzedowy-na-krajowej-liscie>.

2 Ewa Zwierzyńska, “Łos wyhaftowany na płótnie, czyli historia ręcznika obrzędowego,” *Kraina Bugu*, no. 10 (Spring 2014), accessed August 25, 2025, <https://krainabugu.pl/los-wyhaftowany-na-plotnie-czyli-historia-recznika-obrzedowego/>.

Historical-Cultural Context and the Liturgical Meaning of the Ritual Towel

Ritual towels in East Slavic culture play an exceptionally important role, often both symbolic and ritualistic. They accompany a person from birth to death, becoming a kind of textile “guide” through life. Liturgical towels were perceived as seats of goodness and carriers of hope for a better fate. They were meant to provide happiness, peace, prosperity, and health. Village women, often unable to read or write, embroidered stories through graphic signs, creating a kind of book written in pictorial script. The towels serve as evidence of the magical bond between humans and God, a manifestation of mystical sacrifice, and a plea for continuous protection. They symbolized the boundaries a person crossed throughout life, offering safety and prosperity. They were present at the most important life moments: during baptism, at weddings, and in funeral rites, symbolizing passage, initiation, and the transformation of existential state.³

One can confidently say that the ritual towel accompanied a person from cradle to grave, symbolizing the path of life, destiny, and the journey undertaken by humans. The first contact occurred at birth, when the newborn was ceremonially wrapped in a towel, which was then hung above the cradle. The towel accompanied the individual throughout life, believed to ward off evil spells and hostile gazes, and to provide divine protection.

On the wedding day, newlyweds would symbolically walk on a towel laid on the ground, and they also stood upon it during the church ceremony. The liturgical towel was used to bind the couple’s hands as they exchanged vows. The bride carried the wedding icon wrapped in an embroidered towel and hung it in her husband’s home. The towel was also used to present bread and salt as a welcome to the newlyweds. A bride received a towel to cover the framed wedding photograph hanging on the wall, as a request for the durability of the marriage and protection of the family.

The final boundary was death. When a family member passed away, a window was opened and a towel was hung in it. For the living, it signaled death; for the soul of the deceased, it marked a passage into the “other” world. The towel was placed in the coffin, wrapping the body of the deceased. An embroidered cloth was also hung on the funeral cross placed in the church. The towel thus became the “guide of the deceased,” symbolizing the threshold of new life. It was treated both as an element of protection and as a bridge between worlds.⁴

The ritual nature of the towel is also expressed in its linear form. Originally, towels were made of handwoven linen fabric, with decorative embroidery placed at the ends. The strip of material, 30 to 40 centimeters wide and about two and a half meters long, symbolized the road of life. One end of the narrow, elongated ritual panel corresponded to birth, while the other symbolized death. The edges were most often decorated with fringes or crochet lace. The strip of cloth, adorned with ornaments and embroidery, became a metaphor for the journey of life—from beginning to end.⁵ This linearity is not accidental: in many East Slavic cultures, life was perceived as a road, its course predetermined but its content filled with signs, symbols, and rituals. The *rushnyk* is therefore not only a utilitarian object but also a textile artifact that speaks to human fate.⁶

The Symbolism of Ornaments and Protective Functions

Ornaments served not only a decorative role but also a magical one—they were believed to protect, ensure fertility, abundance, and happiness. This practice reflects a broader phenomenon present in many cultures: an everyday object is endowed with the function of an amulet, a guardian, and a mediator between the human world and the world of spirits. Ornamentation is never accidental; each sign carries a specific meaning. Geometric, floral, and anthropomorphic patterns create a kind of visual language through which people have, for centuries, conveyed ideas related to life, nature, the cosmos, and the sacred.

4 Zwieryńska, “Los wyhaftowany na płótnie.”

5 Fine Art Today, “Rushnyky: Sacred Ukrainian Textiles,” *Fine Art Connoisseur*, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://fineartconnoisseur.com>.

6 Fine Art Today, “Rushnyky: Sacred Ukrainian Textiles.”

The most common motifs are geometric figures: rhombuses, squares, and crosses.⁷ The rhombus symbolizes fertility and life, standing as a sign of the earth and femininity. The cross fulfills a protective function, referring both to the Christian cross and to archaic notions of the four cardinal directions, harmony, and cosmic order.⁸ Floral motifs—branches, trees of life, flowers—carry meanings connected with the cycle of nature, renewal, and beauty. The Tree of Life is a universal motif found in many cultures, but in *rushnyks* it gains special significance: it connects the three spheres of the cosmos—earthly, heavenly, and underworld—becoming the axis of the world.⁹

In my design interpretation, I drew upon this symbolism without literally copying specific patterns. The inspiration came from protective signs taken from Ukrainian folk embroidery—simplified, transformed, and reinterpreted in the language of contemporary design. Instead of literal reproduction, I chose analogy, resemblance, and suggestion. The motifs that appear on the silhouettes evoke symbols of life, beauty, and youth, yet they are not faithful imitations. In this way, I preserved the spirit of tradition while giving the projects an individual, authorial character.

Translating Tradition into the Language of Clothing – The Concept of the Silhouettes

The rich symbolism of the *rushnyk* became the starting point for the creation of two knitted clothing silhouettes. The form of these designs is based on the specific gesture of wrapping the body with a long strip of fabric—a direct reference to the construction of the ritual towel.

7 Zwierzyńska, "Los wyhaftowany na płótnie."

8 Ewa Kępa, Podlaski ręcznik obrzędowy – jego symbolika, formy i sposoby wykonywania, in *Akademia kompetencji kulturowych mieszkańców województwa podlaskiego. Raport z badań*, ed. Alicja Kisielewska and Joanna Mytnik-Daniluk (Białystok: University of Białystok Press, 2024), accessed August 27, 2025, <http://hdl.handle.net/11320/17288>.

9 Monika Maciewicz, "Ręczniki obrzędowe w kulturze Słowian," *Jesteśmy Słowianami*, published approximately 6–7 years ago, accessed August 27, 2025, <https://www.jestesmyslowianami.pl/reczniki-obrzedowe-w-kulturze-slowian/>.

The linearity of the garment reflects the metaphor of life—from birth to death—highlighting the ritual dimension of clothing. I treat the act of wrapping the body in fabric as a kind of symbolic ritual of consecration. These garments are not reconstructions of tradition, but contemporary reinterpretations: a fashion dialogue with culture, in which clothing becomes a carrier of the sacred.

In this way, the *rushnyk*, once accompanying humans in everyday and liminal rituals, gains new life in the context of unique garments—as a form that still connects beginning and end, body and spirituality, individual and community.

When creating the two silhouettes inspired by the ritual towel, I focused on its essential form: a long strip of fabric that envelops the body. I used elongated, rectangular knitted fragments which, similar to a *rushnyk* used to “clothe” icons, were wrapped around the silhouette. The act of donning such attire can be interpreted as a ritual in itself: it is not ordinary clothing, but matter that changes the wearer’s status, endowing it with symbolic significance.

The silhouettes created within this project are minimalist, yet not ascetic. Their strength lies in the structure of the knitted weaves and in the reference to the protective power of ornaments. White and gold became the only colors used in my realizations. In Ukrainian culture, white symbolizes purity, innocence, and protection, while gold (or yellow) represents the sun, wealth, prosperity, and abundance. Though different in meaning, when combined, these colors form a symbolism of spiritual richness and royal purity, embodying divine presence.

The first silhouette—*Rushnyk I*—was designed as a loosely flowing form that envelops the body without restricting movement. It consists of a skirt made of pleated knit, arranged in the form of a flounce. The upper part is a knitted panel wrapping the body with a single long element. This panel is interlaced across the torso in a ribbon-like arrangement, featuring a knot that symbolically refers to life’s encountered obstacles and difficulties. On one end, I placed a series of jacquard patterns inspired by the ornamental systems of ritual textiles. The second silhouette—*Rushnyk II*—is constructed from a similar knitted panel, though its arrangement differs slightly: the bands intersect across the body, creating a system of crossed pleats, with a concentrated configuration forming the central part. The lower section is completed by a simple pleated skirt. The two silhouettes complement one another: presenting variations of arrangement that embody organic fluidity and rhythm. *Rushnyk I* was presented at the international exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion* at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź (March 12–April 14, 2024), while *Rushnyk II* was shown during the second edition of the same exhibition at the *Titanikas* Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vilnius (January 9–February 8, 2025).

An essential element of the concept is linearity—both in relation to the form of the garment and to the process of life, of which the *rushnyk* is a metaphor. The silhouette becomes a record of the journey: from birth, through rites of passage, to death. In this way, the realization ceases to be merely a form of clothing and becomes a bearer of cultural meaning. The act of wrapping with fabric can be seen as a protective gesture, introducing the individual into the sphere of the sacred. In this sense, the project transcends the boundaries of functional fashion and becomes a performative act of ritual character.

Technology of Execution and the Role of Knitted Structure

One of the important aspects of my project is the application of contemporary knitting technologies. The designs were produced on a Stoll CMS 530ki electronic knitting machine, with a gauge of 7. The jacquard technique makes it possible to create complex patterns and textures, as well as to “embed” ornament directly into the fabric structure, producing an effect of depth and visual richness while remaining faithful to the tradition of the *rushnyk*, where ornament was always an integral part of the textile. In the patterned elements, I used a twill-type jacquard technique with relief. The symbolic protective signs were transformed and reinterpreted in my own way, creating analogies to the original ornaments found on ritual towels.

The long unpatterned knitted panels were executed using a pleating structure. The repetitive rhythm of the pleats refers to the sequential nature of embroidered patterns on *rushnyks*. The play of light and shadow on the knitted bands adds visual weight to the garments and emphasizes their sculptural quality, highlighting the relationship between the body and the soft material. The person wrapped in the strip of fabric becomes a dynamic construction—akin to an architectural structure, where lines and rhythm organize space.

Knitting, and especially its properties—elasticity and the ability to change form—makes it highly suitable for design experimentation. In the context of the *rushnyk*, its organic nature acquires an additional dimension: the material responds to the body much like the traditional ceremonial towel once responded to ritual gestures of wrapping and binding.

In my project, knitting is therefore not merely an aesthetic medium but also carries symbolic meaning. Its capacity to envelop the body, adapt to it, and simultaneously take on an architectural form reflects the complex symbolism of the *rushnyk*: protection, ritual, and the linear path of life.

Experiment and Creative Process: Knitting as Living Matter

The design process inspired by the *rushnyk* was based on experimentation with knitting—a material capable of responding to movement, tension, and gravity. In my design practice, this meant consciously “testing” the boundaries of the fabric: twisting, layering, tying, wrapping. Each attempt became a kind of dialogue with the material, where I did not so much impose form as discover it within the process.

This approach is closely related to the philosophy of *material-driven design*,¹⁰ in which the material itself dictates the direction of creative exploration. Here, knitting appears as “alive”—responsive, transformative, and opening up new compositional possibilities. This method also resonates with the tradition of the *rushnyk*, in which the weaver or embroiderer did not merely reproduce patterns but often improvised, creating an individual symbolic record.

In this context, experimentation became not only a design tool but also a ritual. The repetitive gestures of folding, wrapping, and pinning acquired the character of a rite in themselves, recalling the process of making a *rushnyk*, where the act of weaving was regarded as an almost sacred activity.

¹⁰ Elvin Karana, Bahar Barati, Valentina Rognoli, and Anouk Zeeuw van der Laan, “Material Driven Design (MDD): A Method to Design for Material Experiences,” *International Journal of Design* 9, no. 2 (2015): 35–54, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/view/1965>.

Final Reflection: Tradition in Dialogue with Modernity

The project inspired by the *rushnyk* motif becomes not only an aesthetic experiment but also a philosophical reflection on the place of tradition in contemporary culture. In a world shaped by globalization and rapid cultural exchange, the return to local symbolic codes acquires particular importance—not as nostalgic reconstruction, but as creative transformation.

The silhouettes designed on the basis of the ritual towel are not replicas of past forms, but reinterpretations that bring forth the essence of linearity, protective symbolism, and the sacred function of textiles. The act of wrapping the body in fabric—a gesture rooted in tradition—here becomes a metaphor for identity, memory, and dialogue with the past.

The final reflection must also touch on the question of the designer's role. In this project, I am not merely the author of a closed form, but a mediator—someone who listens to the material, the tradition, the symbolism, and from these layers builds a new quality. This approach stands in opposition to the dominant consumerist narrative in fashion; instead, it is rooted in process, contemplation, and a conscious engagement with cultural heritage.

Thus, the project demonstrates that tradition is not a burden, but a source of creative energy. The motif of the *rushnyk*, once a guide through the transitions between birth and death, here becomes a guide through the transition between past and future—between local culture and the global language of design. The garment born of this inspiration is more than a utilitarian object: it becomes a narrative of protection, life, and the sacred.

Bio

Anna Kuzmitowicz is a designer and professor at the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where she is a head of the Knitwear Design Studio. She holds a PhD and habilitation in Fine Arts and combines academic work with professional experience in the fashion industry. Her experimental knitwear collections, merging fashion, sculpture, craftsmanship, and technology, have been presented at numerous international exhibitions and fairs.



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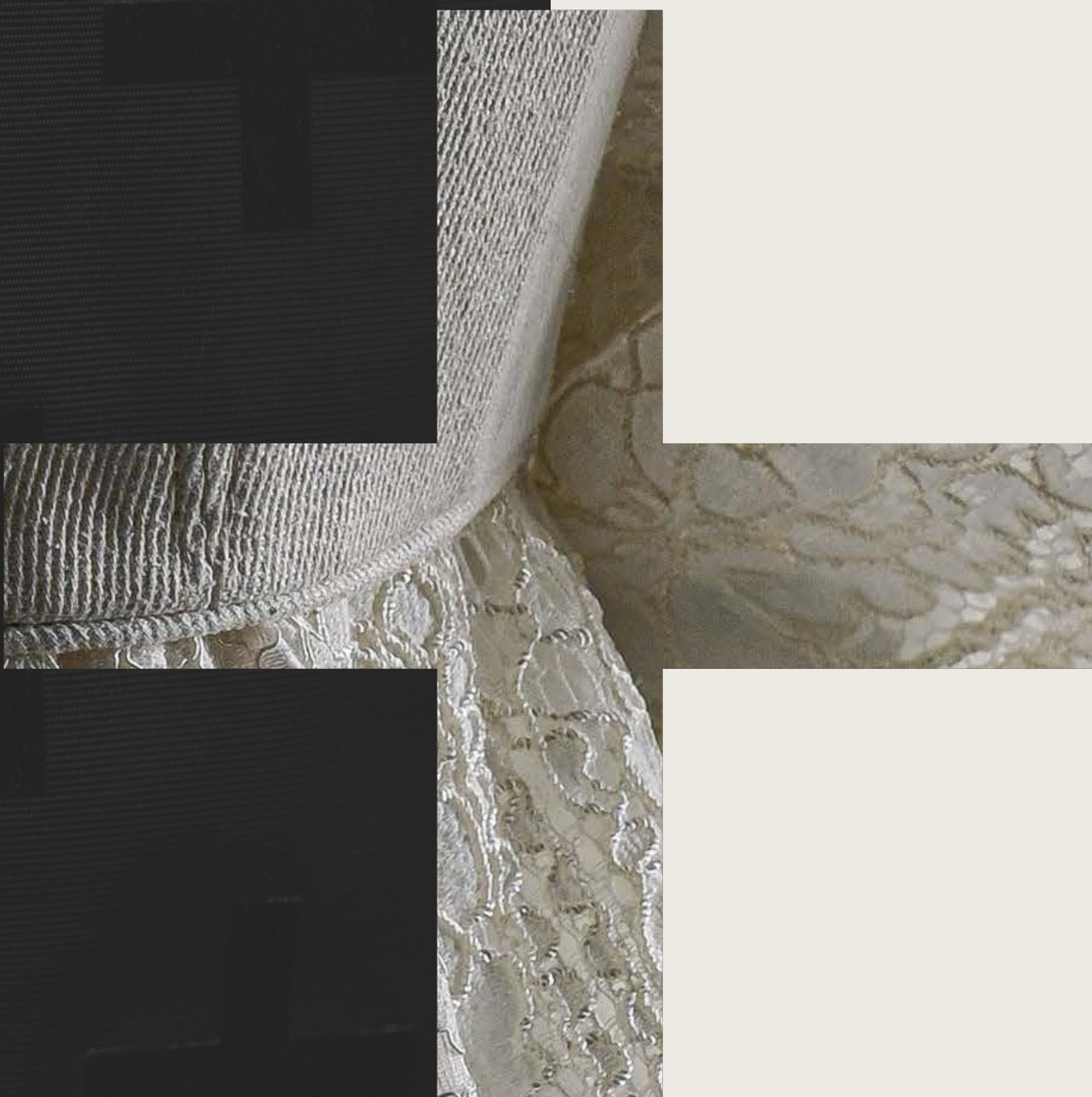
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Between Narrative and Design:

An
Autoethnographic
Study of a
Wedding Dress



Abstract

This article explores the integration of autoethnographic methodology into fashion design through the creation of a wedding dress. Drawing on personal experience, narrative practice, and cultural context, the study examines how emotions, storytelling, and symbolic meaning can be translated into garments. The author reflects on the stages of fashion research and autoethnography—creative writing, text analysis, distancing, character definition, visualization, sketching, and transformation into a fashion object—showing how a wedding dress became both a personal story and a professional milestone. The project demonstrates how fashion transcends its functional role, becoming a narrative medium that carries memory, identity, and cultural legacy.

Keywords: autoethnography, fashion design, wedding dress, narrative, personal experience, cultural identity, creative process.

“Stories tell about our lives; they also become a part of our lives,” said Professor George C. Rosenwald, who dedicated his scholarly work to studying how stories and narratives shape human lives. I could not agree more. For as long as I can remember, I have been a fanatic for stories. My earliest authentic memories of artistic activity involve creating films in my mind, visualizing song lyrics in my head by inventing new scenarios, and observing passersby on the street, imagining them in different outfits. Later, these stories appeared on the walls of my room, and eventually, they were recorded on paper.

Driven by a hunger for stories and characters, I chose to study acting, and stories eventually led me to fashion design. Quite unexpectedly—as good stories often are—I became a wedding dress designer. I believe a good story has unexpected twists, moments of tension, captivates and holds you, brings both tears and laughter, carries a touch of drama, and is always, always grounded in truth. Such was the story of my wedding dress.

I discovered the possibilities of autoethnographic research during my master’s studies. This approach, exploring the environment through personal experience and the practice of writing biographies, not only unlocked new creative methods but also illuminated my future professional path. In my master’s work, I immersed myself in the search for points of synthesis between these very different methods, which were nonetheless subconsciously familiar to me and intuitively practiced.

The term “autoethnography” was first mentioned in the 1970s by anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt in a publication in the *American Anthropologist* journal. Although he did not provide a precise definition, Goldschmidt remarked on the changing scope of research, noting that all ethnography is, in fact, self-ethnography, and that research often reveals more about the researcher than about the subject.¹

Looking for a modern definition of autoethnography, one would find it described as a qualitative research strategy or a branch of ethnographic methodology. Among the most prominent scholars in the field, Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, in their publication *Autoethnography: An Overview*, describe it as follows:

Autoethnography is a written research method that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to help the researcher and the audience understand cultural experience (ethno). The researcher uses the principles of autobiography and ethnography to write an autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both a process and a product.²

By combining the steps of autoethnographic research with those of fashion research practice, I sought an authentic path for creating a character, raising the question: How does a fashion designer work when the source of inspiration is based on personal experience that has no visual material? The steps of fashion design research are not clearly defined, so a designer refines the methods that work best for them during their practical work. Often, the creative process begins with a source of inspiration that has a visual form. In my own practice, I apply this approach in my brand, communicating authentic stories of clients and creations. I treat each individual commission as if it were a scene from a film, presenting a new character with their own life story.

1 Walter Goldschmidt, “Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Autoethnographic Appraisal,” *American Anthropologist* 79, no. 2 (1977), 293–308.

2 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36, no. 4 (2011): 273–90.

I must admit that my wedding dress was not created with the intention of becoming a fashion or autoethnographic study; however, the creative process still contained all the necessary steps. When integrating autoethnographic research into fashion design practice, I typically follow seven steps in order:

1. Creative writing;
2. Text analysis, using the autoethnographic research method;
3. Distancing;
4. Identifying characters and specifying their tasks;
5. Visualizing character portraits using the chosen technique;
6. Sketching;
7. Translating the research into fashion objects.

In this case, however, the fashion process was far more intuitive, guided by emotions, artistic sensitivity, and professional practice. The dress, after fulfilling its primary function as a wedding garment, became a fashion object imbued with autoethnographic stories, reflecting the character I embodied, and later gained a further life as an exhibition piece.

“Research is what I’m doing when I don’t know what I’m doing.”³

I began the creative process, as I would with any other project, by following the steps of fashion research practice. Simon Seivewright describes fashion research as an essential part of any design process, providing a foundation upon which desired creative outcomes can be built and developed.⁴ He explains that research includes the initial search for ideas even before the design begins. It should be an experimental process that helps to explore, discover, or supplement one’s knowledge about a particular subject, market, consumer, or technology. Although in my daily professional practice I have simplified and individualized the steps of fashion research according to my needs as a designer and the needs of my clients, in this project I returned to the thoroughness and structure of my student years. It is somewhat sad to admit, but in professional work, such detailed fashion research has become a luxury, requiring an extraordinary amount of time, attention, and resources that designers usually do not have.

³ R. L. Weber, *A Random Walk in Science* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

⁴ Simon Seivewright, *Basics Fashion Design: Research & Design 01* (2007), 8.

Naturally, a garment must first fulfill its functional purpose. However, creating for oneself is always a tremendous challenge, sometimes even impossible. I have met wonderful, talented seamstresses who cannot even adjust a pair of trousers for themselves, and designers who buy clothes from fast-fashion stores or dress in “uniforms” day after day—not because they do not care or do not want to, but because they are unable to create something for themselves.

One story perfectly illustrates a designer’s relationship with a garment as a wearable object. A colleague of mine, an experienced designer, bought a stunningly beautiful jacket while traveling. However, even in the fitting room, she twisted and turned it, examining the inner seams and hems. Being extremely meticulous, she did not overlook a tiny flaw in the inner part of the jacket—which essentially was not even a flaw, or could only be seen by turning the jacket inside out and looking very closely. The jacket was fantastic, and, encouraged by those around her, she went ahead and bought it. Well, guess what—that tiny detail, a micro flaw, annoyed her so much that she could not wear the jacket at all. We laugh about this story good-naturedly, because everyone in this profession deeply understands our colleague—her precision, her fussiness, and her meticulousness, both toward the garment and herself.

But let’s return to the wedding dress and its creative process. As I mentioned, in my daily work I am surrounded by characters, and I perceive every person I meet as if they were a film character, with an authentic storyline, inherent traits, and energy that set them apart and facilitate the design process. However, seeing myself as a client while creating such an important garment—with its emotional, aesthetic, and value-laden weight, which had to reflect not only me as a person but also me as a designer—was a real challenge.

While conducting fashion research, I aimed for intimacy and sought my own philosophy, not only about clothing design itself but also about marriage. What does a wedding garment mean to me and to us? What meanings does it convey, and how do I want it to represent not only my personality but, in part, us as a couple?

I kept saying I'd rather dress ten brides than myself. I had never had a more hideous, complicated, demanding, impossible client. Damn her. I will never work again. Honestly, I'll go to other designers—let them deal with me and good luck to them. I can't even imagine how the most skilled, patient seamstress in the world didn't tell me to shove it. I always joked that brides want puffy but straight, romantic but minimalist, with a veil but without, long sleeves but short... I could go on forever... dresses. YES! I GET YOU... I AM THAT BRIDE!!!⁵

The sources of inspiration for my dress were both historical and emotional. I knew that I wanted a structured, non-sexualized corset, inspired by sixteenth-century historical costume. A flattened chest was an important nuance throughout the overall look. Through the dress's design choices, I aimed to convey a sense of modesty, restraint, and respect. One of the most striking decorative details in the design was the hand-embroidered rose on the chest, echoing the color of my husband's suit. This rose is a visual interpretation of the quote from the *Song of Songs*: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."⁶ I will not attempt to unpack the Biblical meanings here; what matters more is the poetic metaphor, emphasizing humility, simplicity, and beauty.

The sacrament of marriage took place at the Church of Christ the King in Klaipėda, so the Christian context, preservation of tradition, and a personal, respectful approach to the ceremony had to be reflected in the silhouette and in covering the body. Having grown up in a deeply religious Samogitian family, the church has always been an inseparable part of me. Sundays, major religious holidays, weddings, funerals, and anniversaries of death were always observed through participation in Mass and the offering of Masses, for both good and bad occasions. In our family, Mass was a celebration, a cleansing, a time of mourning, a request for health, a moment of gratitude, and a certain point of reference. If things were good—you went to Mass; if things were bad—you went as well. This tradition, passed unconsciously from my family to the family I created, meant that our wedding celebration took place not at a table but in the church, and with my dress, I sought to reflect that emotion.

I want to be as much myself as I possibly can. To live that wonderful day in my own skin, in my own being, in the space we share—not in an image or a façade.⁷

5 Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė–Mikalauskė, "Our Wedding Story, or Barefoot and Bare-Faced," excerpt from an autoethnographic story, accessed October 7, 2025, www.aprilis-studio.com.

6 *Song of Songs* 2:1 (Lithuanian translation by K. Burbulis, *The Bible*, 1999).

7 Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė–Mikalauskė, "Our Wedding Story, or Barefoot and Bare-Faced," excerpt from an autoethnographic story, accessed October 7, 2025, www.aprilis-studio.com.

While carrying out the preparatory creative work and considering not only the concept but also the context, I sought intimacy, connection, and a merging with the theme and the future creation. Looking at the history of autoethnography, it is fairly clear that this written research method does not aim for the researcher's detachment or depersonalization, and instead encourages emotional engagement. Viewed from today's perspective, through the eyes of a researcher, I can see that this stage did not harm the research but added depth to it. However, when moving into the production stage, I had to employ the step of distancing and treat myself as my own client, so as not to repeat the story of my colleague and the jacket I mentioned earlier. Thus, in the creative process, by using the steps of integrating personal experience into fashion design practice—sketching, defining the character (myself), specifying the task, and creating an emotional portrait—I was able to move into detachment.

The preparatory design work, the emotion-driven selection of fabrics, and the planning of decorative details were already set, so during the execution phase of the project I became my own client. During fittings, I often covered my reflection in the mirror with my hand, trying to look strategically and focus only on the lines, seams, and silhouette—how far or close it was to the sketch, how well it fit the body in the reflection. I must admit that this is the most personal work I have ever done, one I had not intended to talk about, examine, or describe. This creative process was organic, authentic, sensitive, and not seeking an audience or recognition. A few days after the celebration, I recorded the most vivid memories and emotions in a story, which I published on the website of my brand, Aprilis. Again, I unconsciously acted as an autoethnographer—capturing not only the story but also the emotions, living memories, and the process.

Whatever I write, I do it from feeling—whether good or bad—and I have little control over the emotional style of the text. Until now, my largest text was a collection of essays exploring very difficult topics such as loneliness, addictions, and personal and collective family experiences, so naturally, the style of those texts appears dense, complex, and chaotic, with very long sentences or even single words. Writing about the wedding story, I felt uplifted and light, so the text bounced along; its style resembles more a work of popular literature or a magazine article excerpt—light, playful, telling of adventures, even a little sweet. From today's perspective, I would like to explore subtler language, pauses, and metaphors, but I understand that this was not the function of this autoethnographic story, nor of its true emotion.

However, in autoethnographic research, it is not enough to simply describe events or emotions that occurred at a specific moment. The ultimate goal of the research is often framed as the viewer's social engagement and transformation. The essence of autoethnographic research is to write an emotionally impactful text that allows the reader to empathize. Carolyn Ellis writes:

Autoethnographers must draw not only on methodological tools and scholarly literature to analyze experience, but they must also consider ways in which others (outsiders) might experience similar events. Autoethnographers are required to use personal experience to illustrate aspects of cultural experience and, in doing so, transform those characteristics into culturally recognizable elements both for insiders (cultural participants) and outsiders (readers).⁸

This fashion creation (now transformed from a wedding dress into a fashion object) embodies not only the symbolic transition into becoming a wife but also my professional transformation. This autoethnographic story has been read more than 700 times and marked the beginning of my journey as a wedding dress designer. Both former and current clients cite this story as one of the reasons they choose bespoke dressmaking and seek not just a garment that fulfills a function, but also a story, symbolism, and meaning.

I consider the creation of character and individual narrative to be one of the most important principles in my work as a designer. I believe that such a garment carries not only an emotional weight but also becomes a visualized experience and a legacy.

When people say that nothing changes after a wedding, I have to disagree—everything changes. I can feel so clearly how my heart has changed. I never knew I could hold so much love inside me—love bigger than myself, bigger than Mantvydas, bigger than the wedding, the tasty or not-so-tasty cake, good or bad music, perfect shoes, or the invitations. We are not naive or head-over-heels fools; after all, we are both children of divorced parents—but our vow was even greater than the marriage itself. I will love and respect you for my entire life. May God help me.⁹

Bio

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128 Vilnius Academy of Arts. She is also the founder of the brand "Aprilis", specializing in bespoke wedding and evening wear. Her practice blends personal experience and autoethnography, shaping garments as narratives of individuality and cultural meaning.

8 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273–90.

9 Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauskė, "Our Wedding Story, or Barefoot and Bare-Faced," excerpt from an autoethnographic story, accessed October 7, 2025, www.aprilis-studio.com.



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List of illustrations

- 1-4. *Love is patient, love is kind*, fragment, project author Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė - Mikalausė, photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė.









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Reconstructing the Mother Goddess:

Art-Based
Research amidst
Mythology,
Psyche, and
Fashion



Annotation

This art-based research is a study of the archetype of the Mother Goddess as a structure which has been eliminated from the subconsciousness but still retains cultural and cognitive significance. The research is based on the insights of archetypal thinking researchers, Jungian analysis, the recontextualization of iconographic sources, and an intuitive methodology of art-based practice. The main goal of the study is to utilize a creative process for the reconstruction of the principle of feminine divinity which has been lost to our consciousness. The fashion design is not the final result but a live field of mental recollection. It is the venue for experimenting with the visualization of collective memory, the sensation of materiality and the symbolism of relic shapes. For the author, the creative process itself is what matters the most, i.e. the interstitial space between fragments, where the pulsing of the seemingly feminine energy can be perceived. The research contributes to the feminist design discourse by offering silence as the epistemological response to cultural disbalance.

Key words: Archetype of the Mother Goddess, psychic archeology, fashion design as a research method, depth intuition, tacit knowledge, archetypal imagery, intuitive methodology.

Religion is a narrative that shapes both cultural archetypes and individual identity. I have once read the idea that religion is what we call our beliefs, while myth is that what others believe. For many years, I have been studying different spiritual practices in an attempt to discover the gateway to my own cultural religion, specifically, Catholicism. Once upon a time, I was deeply moved by the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Religion is like a mother. No matter how much you fancy your friend's mother, you cannot renounce your own"¹. This quote has turned into an internal compass, forcing me to constantly reconsider why my *inherent* religion does not satisfy my spiritual needs.

In an attempt to calm down my "critical western" mind, I try to accept the Bible not as a doctrine but as a living myth, a narrative that has the power to speak to humans. Joseph Campbell claims that the primary function of a living myth is to align consciousness with the preconceived conditions of its existence², the nature of life, which is mortality. However, my cultural myth fails to carry out this function. The Christian narrative lacks that feminine side of divinity and, perhaps, this is why I cannot find my place there.

1 Mohandas K Gandhi, *Kelias dievo link* [The Way to God], trans. Into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Dialogo kultūros institutas, 1999), 7.

2 Joseph Campbell, *Keliai į laimę. Kaip mitai padeda mums keistis* [Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation], trans. Into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Tyto Alba, 2024), 29.

This art-based research has arisen from the particular existential imbalance as an internal necessity to find the answers to the questions that have been significant to me both as a person and as a creator. Based on my vast experience as an artist, educator, and spiritual practice researcher, I have learned how to divide large-scale problems into smaller units that can be overcome. This is how the goal of this study came to be: **to use art as a form of research to reflect on how the lack of the Mother Goddess in the cultural myth has been affecting my mind and creative ability.**

The initial momentum was given by a question uttered by my four-year-old son 20 years ago: "If God is our Father, do we not have a Mother?" This has become the axis of my research, the voice of collective longing which has been reverberating somewhere deep within me. In my research, I question what happens when one of the most important figures, the Goddess, the Mother, the Great Feminine Being, disappears from the underlying cultural narrative? Does this absence manifest only in the external world or is it inscribed in my own mentality? I am looking for the answer both in theoretical sources and in the creative process.

The objectives of the research encompass the tracking of the traces of the lost internal and external Mother Goddess. Here, I will be relying on the works of Marija Gimbutienė, Pranė Dundulienė, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Joseph Campbell, and others. I am searching for the signs of the internal Goddess via creative efforts by observing the archetypal aspects of the Mother as manifested via fashion objects, e.g. the Greatest Goddess, Shadow Mother, Collective Mother, and the women of my own family line. In my research, I meditate on whether or not a fashion designed object can embody the figure of the Mother Goddess as an internal mental structure. What conditions must be met for the shape of the feminine cosmic principle to emerge? What materials and visuals should be selected? Can the audience experience a connection with this deeply personal piece of art?

The cognition of the immaterial information fields is also important in this study. Legendary music producer Rick Rubin calls it the "the Source" or "the Field"³. I know that one can "catch" this field intuitively, with "antennas." Such a method is not a rational one; rather, the process is intuitive, much like knowing that I am the most important "tool" of art-based research methods, that I am like a sensitive filter, a vessel, where both the personal and collective subconsciousness flows or is stored. When I was a PhD student, I had researched *depth intuition*⁴. It is employed here as an internal methodological axis that supplements the analytic, comparative, and empirical research methods.

3 Rick Rubio, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2023), 5-27.

4 Renata Maldutienė, „Intuicija kaip spalvų prognozavimo įrankis“ [“Intuition as Color Forecasting Tool”], in: *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis*, Editor of this Volume Vytautas Michelkevičius, Vilnius, 2018, T.91, p.121-142.

This study is also a deeply personal act. It evokes dreams, visuals, and fragments of family memory. In my creative process, I seek inspiration from the iconography of the old Goddess, children's fairy-tales, folklore, and family photographs. All of this, combined with the many years of experience as a fashion designer, result in a seamless internal research field.

I. Tracking the Lost Goddess

Nowadays, it is no secret that the voice of a woman has been suppressed in patriarchal structures. The topic has been studied by many researchers, such as Gimbutienė, Merlin Stone, Carol P. Christ, Campbell, Erich Neumann, Gerda Lerner, and others. However, at the epicenter of this art-based research, lies both a historical analysis and an intimate question: how much of this suppressed voice can I hear within myself? How can this voice gain shape via creative endeavor?

One of the main pillars of the study is the archeological outlook of Gimbutienė. According to her, a powerful Goddess-worshipping culture used to exist in Europe during the Neolithic Age. It was the type of civilization where the female power was integral to cosmic harmony. Her research contained proof that the Great Mother, the giver of life, the guardian, the symbol of transformation, was the religious centerpiece before the invasion of the Indo-Europeans. As the patriarchal gods rose to power, the Goddess was pushed out from the religious discourse. "The earliest European civilization was savagely destroyed by the patriarchal element and it never recovered, but its legacy lingered in the substratum which nourished The Old European creations were not lost; transformed, they enormously enriched the European psyche".⁵ In terms of research, this outlook has created a theoretical basis to reflect on personal creative insights appearing from within dreams, visuals, and body memory, i.e. the internal "substrate."

This “substrate” is not an archeological matter but subconscious layers that hide traces of the cultural and personal memory. The thoughts of Gimbutienė resonate with the concept of *psychic archeology*⁶ presented by Estés. It is an internal digging that the author defines as the practice of going down into the rubble of feminine ruins in search of the lost fragments of her own personality. The traces of the absence of the Goddess that might be buried in the internal “ruins” and in the whisperings of intuition – these have become the material of my research.

The process of *internal digging* requires a quiet space. Estés claims that women, who seek to build a connection with their inner feral woman, must consciously “enter a space, separated from the daily noise and external interferences⁷.” In most spiritual practices, it is defined as a link to a quiet mind, meditation, contemplation or the act of simply being and doing nothing. This is the space, where the so-called “silent knowledge” of artists is buried. I can bear witness to this on the basis of my own experiences as an artist. Only when the external mind is quieted down, do the “antennas” catching the signals from the collective and personal subconsciousness turn on. The creation of the items for the Reconstruction of the Mother Goddess project proved it once more. Intellectual analysis alone is not enough. Rather, an open-minded and intuitive state is a prerequisite. This is the only way I can enter “my own cellar,” dig around in my “substrate,” and, if speaking in *Jungian* language, delve into the depths of my subconsciousness, beyond the boundaries of the conscious “me.”

When making correlations between cultural narrative and intuition, I also employed studies on the Baltic gods and mythological figures by Ethnologist Pranė Dundulienė. She had proven that such figures as Laima and Žemyna were marginalized: first, their significance had been diminished; later, they were forced into secondary roles, followed by total extinction. Nevertheless, their traces can still be found in folk songs. Various *lulling* sounds, such as *leliumai* and *laduto* are the remnants of the pro-Baltic great goddesses of Lada and Lela⁸. These sounds reverberated with the memories of the lullabies sung by my grandmother. Her voice, the patterns of woven bedspreads dimming the windows, the ritualistic swaying, all of it has become a living connection with the archaic vestiges of the feminine spirit. Having caught this subdued voice of the Goddess from the “inner crypt,” I have jotted down several notes and sketches in my notebook, which had later become essential in my creative endeavors.

6 Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Moteris bėganti su vilkais: laukinės moters archetipas mituose ir pasakose* [Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype], trans. into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Alma littera, 2010), 15.

7 Based on Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, the lost feminine parts most often coincide with the Great Feminine Being which has many names. When the connection to this Being is lost, issues arise.

8 Pranė Dundulienė, *Pagonybė Lietuvoje: moteriškos dievybės* [Paganism in Lithuania. Feminine Deities], (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidyklos centras, 2021), 83-85.

Famous mythologist Campbell, student of Carl Gustav Jung, says that “we have inherited such a harrowing male mythology, which demands the subjugation of the female system.”⁹ This shows a general tendency of restricting the power of the Goddess systematically to the point where her voice has become inaudible. As the religions of male deities gained solid ground, the Goddesses were brutally pushed out of the conscious mentality of humankind through political tools. Stone’s research also confirms these findings. She has relied on the analysis of the Old Testament to show how “The priests of Yahweh not only denied women any position of importance in religious life, but also sought to destroy the images, symbols, and rites of the earlier Goddess religion.”¹⁰

Academic studies only serve as an affirmation of my old suspicions. Ever since I was a child, I have known that the world has a female and a male, mother and father, day and night, summer and winter, mind and body, or spirit and matter. How, then, could there be only God, the Father, of the male gender? My four-year-old son needed no high education to understand such a simple matter, after all, “such is the Kingdom of God.”¹¹ Academically, my research is neither historical nor theological. I do not seek to prove the existence of a matriarchate or to join a discussion of who is better suited to knit and who is better off studying Plutarch.¹² It is simply that with every cell of my being I know that the image of the Goddess that has been expelled from the conscious of the humankind prevents our minds from functioning fully, and its consequences are transferred to the physical world as well. The fear of the Goddesses is a tenacious thing, and it is no wonder that with decline of their status, so did the value of the woman decline as well.¹³ When the Biblical God became deeply rooted in the Western cultures, the Goddess was finally and totally pushed from the collective consciousness, and the voices of real women were gradually silenced.

9 Joseph Campbell, *Keliai į laimę. Kaip mitai padeda mums keistis* [Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation], trans into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Tyto Alba, 2024), 71.

10 Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, (New York: Harcourt: Harcourt, 1976), 72.

11 Mk 10, 13-16.

12 A reference to the discussion in 2009 after the following published article: A.Šliogeris: A Knitting Handbook for Girls and Plutarch for Boys.

13 Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Kiekviena moteris – deivė* [Goddesses in Everywoman], trans into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Alma Littera, 2017), 36.

During my research, the traces of the external Goddess helped me understand the transformation of her image, from an all-encompassing cosmic giver of birth into a fragmented, subdued, and symbolically sundered figure. She has been reduced to the level of separate elements.¹⁴ As I started working on the sketches for this project, I attempted to depict an integral idea of a costume. However, even though I have created hundreds of costumes before, I was unable to produce a satisfying result. No matter how much I tried, I could not recreate the full and solid image of the Mother Goddess in my mind. I could not sense the unbroken internal structure. This was not due to a deficient technique, but was due to the lack of internal assurance, the missing piece that I have been trying to create, or “reconstruct.” Each and every attempt at sketching the Goddess seemed somehow artificial, alien, and even nerve-wracking. This was the sign that the image of this figure had not been formed in my subconsciousness. I “entered the space” and allowed myself to release all expectations. I simply observed that which was born in my sketches and started recording their fragments, the vestiges of the Mother Goddess that might one day join together into a single unified figure.

II. Hero's Journey without the Goddess

The expulsion of the Mother Goddess from the spiritual life is illustrated on a historical and symbolical level by the Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, a mythological structure, where the mortal man transforms into a spiritual seeker. The Jungian outlook would claim it as a journey to one's self, the road of individuation. Even though the analysis of Campbell is significant and charming in its universal nature and archetypical power, its hero is almost always a man. If one takes a look at the global religious and mythological narratives, a single trend becomes apparent: the seekers of truth, wisdom, and spiritual ways are most often men. They can be mythological figures, deities, priests, reverends, gurus, or yogis. Meanwhile, the women are mostly depicted as witches, seductresses, temptresses, or mysterious aids. Even Campbell himself has admitted that there is practically no model for an individual woman's journey in mythology.¹⁵ According to him, patriarchal narratives include a female archetype mostly as a component of the man's journey.

¹⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Deivės. Dieviško moteriškumo paslaptys* [Goddesses. Mysteries of the Feminine Divine], trans into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Tyto Alba, 2024), 127.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

The Hero's Journey is a symbol of the psychological development of personality. Then why is this journey defined as a man's journey in most cultures? Does the mind of a woman contain no spiritual road leading towards inner wisdom? Or, perhaps, the structure of the Heroine's Journey is much different? After all, the systematic silence of a woman's voice signifies a deep deviation of the mental field in spiritual practices. The feminine deity loses its voice, and its integrality as an individual subject is sundered. Perhaps, in the light of several hundreds of years of battling for equality, this is the time for a new narrative via art and fashion – a narrative, where the Goddess is, at the very least, longed for?

In 1990, in response to Campbell's model, Maureen Murdock wrote *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*,¹⁶ where she attempted to show that woman's mental and spiritual road had a different structure, compared to that of man's. Of course, the Heroine's Journey developed by her did not gain as much popularity as Campbell's work, but it did contribute significantly to Jungian psychotherapy and feminist psychology. Murdock relied more on the psychotherapeutic experience and reflection than on an analysis of myths. She studied the spiritual journey of a woman as a movement: a separation from the female origin, the mother, and then coming back to it once again. She claims that at the beginning of her journey, the woman, the Heroine, often renounces her biological and archetypical mother as a weak, emotional, and unwise figure, yet such rejection leads to an inner hollowness. I am familiar with this conflict. It could be that my journey to the reconstruction of the Mother Goddess is, in part, an attempt to recapture my sacral connection with the Great Feminine Being.

Like Murdock, I am sure that the Heroine's path to wisdom exists. However, it is subtle, internal, and with no external indicators, so it is very difficult to perceive. When saying this, I rely on my *depth intuition*. For many years, I have taken part in various spiritual practices, activities, and their observations. I have noticed a paradox: women are most interested in spiritual searching,¹⁷ but most of the mentors are men. Why? I believe this to be the clearly visible consequences of the expulsion of the Goddess from the real world to the subconsciousness. One Indian yogi at the silent retreat answered this question of mine stating that the number of female *gurus* is smaller because their ego is also smaller; they do not need a stage, and they are inclined to serve selflessly. Perhaps, the *Sophia* that the men try searching for in the Hero's Journey lies dormant in women? The Greatest Deity has dissolved when immersed into the waters of the subconsciousness, sunk into everyone's minds, and becomes an ever-existing entity, which is, however, as invisible as water to the fish. It could be that each woman contains a fragment of the spirit of the expelled Goddess who is not looking for a stage or spectators. On the contrary, like a mother, she prepares her man, the Hero, for his journey and, like Penelope, she stays and

16 Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, (Boulder: Shambhala, 2020).

17 This is a free assumption from long-term observation at yoga studios, churches, various self-growth and spiritual practices. Similar observations have been made by famous psychotherapist Prof. Eugenijus Laurinaitis, when speaking at the conference titled Parents in Connection (2022). https://youtu.be/Ry5B0q2_ktc?si=0VoWlcrEUglZp8C8 from 4 min.

does nothing much. Well, she “only” protects the entire kingdom, raises the children, and overcomes all the dangers, whilst the Hero keeps wandering for years and years, seeking spirituality. The silent deeds of her servitude are not rewarded; rather, she simply exists. After all, she is a woman. She is the Mother, the Land and the Sky, capable of giving life and capable of taking it as well. It is she who can turn her man into a god and allow him to believe that she was born of his rib. Her biggest downfall is not the picking of an apple but forgetting her own divinity, which nowadays often means the simple desertion of own body and spirit. Campbell once wrote, “This is the mythological role of the feminine principle: she gives birth to us physically and she is the mother of our second birth as a spiritual being.”¹⁸

To me, it is evident that the balance of the native religion is off. Its scales are heavily tipped by the male principle, whilst “in prehistoric times, not even a single image of God the Father has ever been recorded.”¹⁹ The mentality of humankind and an individual is older than the religions, and its endless “container” stores more information than a selective myth. Perhaps, this is why I am perplexed by the elimination of the Mother Goddess. The sense of injustice – now recognised by science as a biological factor²⁰ – arising from the fact that the Goddess is forced to dwell in the shadows, inevitably creates a traumatic tension within the psyche and prevents me from fully joining Catholic rituals.

As I return to the modern days, an interesting question arises. Can the concealment of the mythical archetype of the Goddess have consequences on our real lives? I am sure that it can and that it already has. Mentality is reality, whether we understand it or not. Perhaps, it is the most important one. Surely, there is no need for proof that people who have grown up with no mother figures experience various difficulties in life. All of us are like orphans – our mother is hidden from us through witchcraft, and her very existence is being negated, for instance, through the disdain for all that is natural and inartificial. Estés has warned of the dangers of suppressing the natural senses related to the feminine origin: “If the society demands all of its members to mistrust and avoid the deep instinctual life, then the predatory element that lives in the spirit of each individual shall only grow stronger and garner its strength.”²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche also studies Christian morals as a conflict with the natural²² and instinctual human side: “woman was God’s second mistake.”²³ This is what Nietzsche says in *The Antichrist*. When I read this book, I had not yet started this art project; however, this question had already been living inside me as evidenced by the note penciled down in the margins: “In principle, the Antichrist should have been a woman, the denied Goddess, nature, Mother.”

18 Joseph Campbell, *Deivės. Dieviško moteriškumo paslaptys* [Goddesses. Mysteries of the Feminine Divine], trans. into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Tyto Alba, 2024), 35.

19 Marija Gimbutienė, *Senoji Europa* [Ancient Europe], (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2022), 20.

20 Prof. Eugenijus Laurinaitis (psychotherapist), statement in a public lecture, source not retrievable. Author’s note: the idea that justice is a biological factor has been supported in various strands of contemporary psychology and neuroscience, although precise references are pending.

21 Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Moteris bėganti su vilkais: laukinės moters archetipas mituose ir pasakose* [Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype], trans. into Lithuanian (Vilnius: Alma littera, 2010), 93.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antikristas* [The Antichrist] trans. into Lithuanian, (Kaunas: Book Ministry, 2023), 24.

23 Ibid., 84.

Modern psychology agrees, unanimously, that the key condition for overcoming trauma is accepting and naming it, while also garnering the understanding of others. When a person gains the courage to speak of their pain and when another person listens to and believes that person, then the healing process begins in earnest. In this art project, I become both the speaker and the listener. As the external stimuli quiet down, many female voices can be heard in the inner “ruins.” “Peter, my brother, what is it that you think? Do you think I have come up with these things in my heart myself or have lied about our Saviour?”²⁴ cried Mary Magdalene, when the apostles of Christ did not believe that the Saviour would entrust his teachings to a woman. It is but one suppressed voice, which has been heard in the text written down in the *Gospel of Mary*, one of many others that have been humbled, downtrodden, condemned, and sentenced. I listen to the silence of these voices that are buried inside me, and to the silence, the voice of which has been taken by history. I believe it. I speak through art, looking for a way to restore the place of the silence and hopefully searching for those who will recognize and hear it.

III. Art as Reconstruction of the Goddess: Transformation of the Silence into Shape

Jung would agree that a piece of art evoked from the depths of subconsciousness is not the property of its creator only but also the reverberation of the collective mind. My creation method is being that reverberation. In my desire to reconstruct the Mother Goddess, I am looking not for a robe but for her voice. I sought to give it sound via space, light, and a manifestation through fashion. The process of creating has transformed into a meditation, a silent contemplation, where the results are no longer as important as the circumstances allowing for the voice of the silence to resound. It is as if being immersed in a Buddhist *Zen* tradition, where insights are not to be attained with effort but arise naturally, when the mind learns how to simply be. In such a state, the fragments of the lost Goddess slowly start to reemerge. It is not the whole but parts of her that are shining like the discoveries of *psychic archeology*. The imagination is overfilled with swimming silhouettes that are almost see-through and framed within the sewing architecture. Robes are like traces of former body parts, drifting in the air like spiritual relics that have wandered in from a dream, a scent, or a vision. Each fragment is like a part of a feminine being that has broken free from the subconsciousness. The fragmented nature of this piece of art has become an authentication of the fact that the archetype of the Mother Goddess is currently living inside me, divided as it is.

Bringing the clues of the disappearance of the Goddess into the material world, I have held a dialogue between different time periods, cultures, and iconographies of femininity. Visual fragments of the old civilizations are intertwined in the textile piece of art. They were not quoted verbally but showed up as archetypical shadows, like a trail of intuition. Flashes of images appear, the images of the oldest Venuses that took on the mantle of the givers of birth, with their prominent hips and abdomen. The vivacious dance of the Goddess of the snakes of Crete and the warlike and eroticized beauty of Ishtar from ancient Mesopotamia vibrated with their vitality and were reflected in the dance of the seams. The Tree of Life and the bird of Lelekè, metaphors of the oldest Baltic deities, became integrated indirectly as if a futuristic premonition of the next piece of art. I have not forgotten Eve and her snake in the Garden of Eden who has echoed in the forbidden names of Sophia, Zoe, and Lilith; the act of hearing their voices turned to silk apples in this piece of art, as if the sinister *Eureka* of cognition hung above the heads of the women, the punishment for cognition, for knowing who you are. This is but a small part of feminine deities shrouded in the shadows that have struggled their way into the light after *inner digging*.

I deliberately included the quote of Jean-Paul Gaultier about the Madonna bralette into the shape of the bra. The red cross at the center is the supposed "target" at the Giver. It is a reference to the source of life and its vulnerability. The target is an archetypical circle with the cultural power, control, and glance directed at it.

Simultaneously, this piece of art is very personal because the memory of the women of my family is hidden inside it. As I worked on this piece, I evoked the memories of my mother's undergarments, the stockings, the jewelry made by my father, which to me, as a child, had always seemed like a manifestation of some intimate and secret femininity. I was familiar with their scent, for I wished so strongly to be close to my mother. The apron symbolized feminine humility and servitude. I remember my grandmother wearing it, always devoted, always ready to accept everything without a complaint. I hand-wove the bottom of the apron as if performing a sacred ritual of silence in honour of my Foremothers.

Even though the piece of art seems fragmented, the total of its parts speak of a subtle connection to the subconsciousness. As I took visitors on a tour of the exhibition, I found them interested and curious about this piece of art. I could say that the female visitors had recognized not the robes, but the message they carried. The symbols of the mythical narrative of fashion opened up the road to the reality, which we cannot yet comprehend consciously.

It was not accidentally that I chose the stiff organza silk as a fabric for the project pieces. Organza silk is ephemeral and see-through but firm like the presence of the shadow of the Mother Goddess in our lives. The fabric held its shape and cast a shade. The pieces hung in the air as if they were relics of the spiritual body's fragments. The mastery of sewing has become both a technical skill and architecture that frames the not-present body of a woman and, at the same time, divides it. The separate fragments in the air create the presence of a ghostly apparition that is both here and not. The Goddess is not a shape but the space in shapes.

The exhibited piece of art has no sound, but the voice of silence resounds within it. It is the voice that I have been looking for in the first research parts, the feminine spiritual figure, the solid mental structure which I have been unable to perceive for such a long time. The shape of this piece is not final; rather, it is open-minded. While it does not depict the Mother Goddess, it does grant space for her to arise from personal subconsciousness, the collective memory, eliminated visuals, and shadow identity.

Conclusions

The art-based research revealed that the archetype of Mother Goddess had not yet disappeared in Western culture. It is only retracted deep into the subconsciousness, where it remains a dissolved, fragmented, and shadowy structure, demanding both intellectual and intuitive cognition.

The research showed that a piece of fashion design could act as an embodiment of the inner structure of the Goddess, as a space where personal and collective subconscious visuals merge. In this context, the archetype is revealed through the field of stress and absence in between shapes and not via direct representation.

However, recognizing this archetype is closely connected to the individual mental boldness of going down into one's *inner ruins*, as if engaged in a certain kind of *psychic archeology*. To do so, one must create an inner empty space to be accessed via conscious separation from both physical and mental external stimuli.

The research revealed that intuitive methods are the key tools for art-based research. It is a sensitive and personal methodology allowing to record that which arises from the depths of the subconsciousness or collective imagination. This affirms the value of created pieces of art as a spiritual act.

The fragmented nature of this piece of art should not be perceived as a shortcoming. On the contrary, it is a sign testifying that the image of the Mother Goddess exists in contemporary consciousness as a divided, yet recognizable archetype, inviting us to reconstruct it through the experience of a connection and not the finality of its shape.

The research contributes to the restoration of the feminine spiritual imagination field and encourages humanity to rethink those religious and cultural narratives, where the voice of a woman has been silenced for far too long.

Bio

Renata Maldutienė is a fashion designer, educator, and researcher with a PhD in Arts. She is a professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, where she has led the Fashion Design Department since 2020. She began her design career in 1991 and worked for many years in the fashion industry. Recently, her work has focused primarily on academic activities, artistic research, and curating fashion exhibitions.



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The Virgin Mary as a Feminist:

Searching for a Costume for the Sacred Feminine Principle

Abstract

The text explores the relationships and tensions between fashion, religion, and feminism. Analyzing the situation of contemporary women in this context, I refer to feminist theology (Mary Dayly, Zuzanna Radzik), art history (Marina Warner), and current social events (the Black Protests in Poland, the Pussy Riot movement in Russia). The research undertaken serves as a starting point for an intermedia project combining clothing and film, the results of which were presented at the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion* at the Central Textile Museum in Łódź in 2024. The completed costume embodies the rebellious spirit of feminist theology, while the film is an attempt to reclaim the image of the biblical Mary for the modern Catholic woman. Theoretical and practical work allowed me to create an image of subversive femininity based on a complex set of inspirations. This process did not conclude my exploration but stimulated my intellectual curiosity. The intersection of fashion, feminism, and religion remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

Keywords: fashion, feminist theology, Virgin Mary, Pussy Riot.

Introduction

Religion, fashion, and feminism may seem like distant galaxies. Religion addresses the spiritual world, while fashion is concerned with temporal matters—often viewed by religion as superficial or worthless. Feminism, in contrast, positions itself in opposition to both spheres, critiquing the patriarchal structures of the church and the commodification of female bodies in consumer culture. However, the polarization of different ideas has always been stimulating for me.

Initially, my artistic practice contained explicit references to the world of fashion, the history of clothing, and popular culture, which I juxtaposed with feminist ideas. I created expressive-symbolic costumes, living sculptures, parodies of fashion shows, and objects on the border between clothing and sculpture. One of the first objects of this kind was presented in a solo exhibition at an art gallery in Rzeszów, housed in a former synagogue. I sought to introduce a feminine element into this former place of worship. The object—a nearly three-meter-long red dress with a crinoline that towers over the audience—features elongated sleeves and ribbons emerging from the crinoline that occupy the gallery space. Titled *Inscribed in Space*, the work can be understood as a substitute for female power. It evokes associations with the mother goddess, although I do not intend it to be linked to any specific beliefs or historical period.

This early work raises issues that recur in my artistic practice: fashion as a means of artistic expression, the reinterpretation of religious myths and narratives, and the use of feminist theories as a tool for self-reflection. These concerns remain relevant to the research described in this text. In seeking an image of the feminine that responds to contemporary needs, I turn to the figure of the Virgin Mary, who has long shaped the imagination of Western culture. When analyzing this figure, I draw on both the traditional Christian narrative and the feminist revision of the myth. The questions that guide my inquiry are: Is Mary an unattainable ideal, a cultural construct, or an echo of ancient goddesses? Situating these issues within the context of fashion is perhaps a daunting task. The aim of this risky endeavor is to uncover the attributes of female rebellion and to create an image of the feminine principle imbued with a sacred character.

Virgin Mary vs. the Rebel

I live in a Catholic country and was raised in a practicing Catholic family, so Christian iconography and tradition have shaped my consciousness. However, I have always found it difficult to reconcile Catholic ideals with my independent spirit and feminist passion.

The Church presents the Mother of God as a role model for women. She embodies feminine virtues such as profound humility, blind obedience, unparalleled chastity, constant self-denial, and heroic patience. This characterization of Mary results from theologians' interpretations, as the Bible itself offers few details about her. The Virgin Mother's attributes create a vision of an unbearably passive and improbable figure.

American feminist and theologian, Mary Daly, describes Mary as a domesticated goddess, an “image of total subservience, the dethroned and sapped Goddess who was converted into a vessel.”¹ Similarly, English art historian and critic Marina Warner notes Mary’s affinity with pre-Christian goddesses, whose pagan power was suppressed. Religious art and theology transformed Mary into a symbol of purity, an attempt to control female sexuality. Warner writes: “Before the Christian transformation, there were other great mothers, goddesses who had the power to give life, but they were often feared, and their sexuality was a threatening force. The Virgin Mary, however, was redefined as a figure whose sexuality was no longer dangerous or threatening. She was purified, tamed, and set in opposition to the wild and untamed power of the pagan goddess.”²

Mary is not a goddess. In Christian iconography, God is masculine, most often depicted as an old man with a gray beard. This portrayal of God is limiting and has consequences. As Polish theologian Zuzanna Radzik argues: “If God is always depicted as male, then over time, God in the common understanding becomes masculine, and men gain privileges in society and the church.”³ Only men can be ordained priests, celebrate Mass, administer communion, and so on. The justification for these privileges is that the person celebrating the liturgy represents Christ, who was male. Moreover, Christ did not call any woman to be an apostle. The church hierarchs also readily invoke the metaphor of Christ as Bridegroom and the Church as Bride. However, as Radzik teasingly asks: “What if, for the sake of metaphor, we assumed that men could not speak on behalf of the bride or receive the sacraments?”⁴ In her book *Church of Women*, Radzik seeks a place for Catholic women who feel lost in the contemporary Church. The relationship between Catholicism and feminism is the subject of her conversations with nuns, theologians, and female priests who have been excommunicated.

The book has a provocative cover: a drawing of the Virgin Mary dressed in pink and knitting a colorful balaclava reminiscent of those worn by Pussy Riot during their performances.

1 Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 73.

2 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1976), 153.

3 Zuzanna Radzik, *Kościół kobiet* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyka Polityczna, 2015), 117.

4 Ibid., 261.

Pussy Riot is a Russian punk collective known for political protests and illegal activities aimed at the Russian government, particularly Putin's patriarchal and oppressive leadership. Their attire typically consisted of brightly colored dresses and tights, with balaclavas covering their faces. The face covering allowed them to remain anonymous and avoid repression from the authorities. However, the group's members did not want to be associated with terrorists, so instead of black balaclavas, they used colorful, homemade knitted beanie hats. Pussy Riot intended the colorful balaclavas not as a disguise but as a means to convey ideas—a feminist strategy of resistance. Nadya Tolokonnikova, the most famous member of the collective, explained the importance of balaclavas in her book *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism*: "I discovered that when I wear a mask, I feel like a superhero and maybe I feel a little more powerful. I feel really brave like a superhero. I discovered that when I'm wearing a mask, I feel a little bit like a superhero and maybe I feel more powerful. I feel really brave, I believe I can do anything and everything, and I believe that I can change the situation. We played at being superheroes, Batwoman or Spider-women, who come to save our country from the villain, but we were choking on laughter looking at ourselves."⁵

The most controversial performance of the collective took place in 2012 at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. After removing their winter clothes, the performers put on colorful balaclavas, ran up the steps leading to the altar, and started jumping and singing a song blended punk rock with traditional Orthodox chant. They chanted: "Virgin Mary, banish Putin! Virgin Mary, become a feminist!" This performance was a reaction to the open support of Putin's re-election by Kirill, the head of the Orthodox Church, who called Putin's rule a miracle from God and criticized his opponents.

While the performance was seen in the West as a groundbreaking work of guerrilla art, in Russia it was met with strong public backlash. Russian propaganda portrayed the group as tools of foreign powers intent on destroying "holy Russia." The members of Pussy Riot were arrested and, following a public trial, found guilty of hooliganism and blasphemy. They were sentenced to two years of imprisonment in Russian labor camps.

Pussy Riot's action presents a different image of femininity that contrasts sharply with the image promoted by the church authorities. They are rebels who call upon Mary for help; however, they are not referring to Mary as she exists in traditional doctrine, but to Mary who is a cultural construct shaped by centuries of subjugating strategies.

5 Nadya Tolokonnikova, *Read and Riot: A Pussy Riot Guide to Activism* (London: Coronet, 2019), 35.

A similarly rebellious attitude was evident in Poland during the so-called Black Protests, which began in 2016. Thousands of women, dressed in black robes and carrying black umbrellas, took to the streets of many cities to demonstrate their dissatisfaction and even anger at the government's plans to tighten anti-abortion laws. The women's strike took an anticlerical form, including acts of disruption of religious ceremonies and the defacement of church facades. This was remarkable given that Poland is considered a Catholic country, where the ethos of the Polish Mother⁶—a woman willing to make any sacrifice for the good of her family and children—remains strong. The Black Protests challenged the traditionally understood role of women as guardians of the home. In this context, the symbol of the Polish Mother was reinterpreted, becoming synonymous with a strong, independent woman who seeks to decide her own fate and control her own body.

Mary also shapes the perception of female corporeality. The virginity of the Mother of God is a Christian dogma. Marina Warner repeatedly points out that the title of "virgin" is a legacy of pagan goddesses, although at the time it was not associated with sexual abstinence. Warner explains: "The love goddesses of the Near East and classical mythology have the right to be virgins despite their lovers dying and rising for them every year. (...) Their sacred virginity symbolized their autonomy."⁷

Creative Process

The figure around which my reflections center is Mary, mother of Jesus—a woman rarely mentioned in the Gospels, yet an important point of reference for many women. Even some feminists did not reject her; instead, they tried to reclaim her, recognizing her potential and, perhaps, the traces of the former mutilated goddess. Therefore, her figure became the starting point for my projects: a film and a unique costume.

The costume references representations of the Virgin Mary in paintings from the Middle Ages. It is a simple, minimalist, blue, floor-length dress—blue being the traditional Marian color. Mariana Warner explains: "As a sky goddess, Mary's color is blue. Her starry mantle is a figure of sky, as in Apuleius's vision of Isis; (...) Blue is the color of space and land and eternity, of the sea and the sky. The reason for the symbolism is also economic, however, for blue was an expensive pigment, obtainable only from crushed *lapis lazuli* imported from Afghanistan, and, after gold, it thus became the medieval painter's most fitting and fervent tribute to the Queen of Heaven."⁸

6 The Polish Mother is a symbol of a patriotic woman, which emerged after the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz wrote the poem *To the Polish Mother*. These were times when the country had lost its independence and the entire burden of running a household and imparting ethical values rested on the shoulders of mothers.

7 Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 47.

8 Ibid., 272.

The dress prepared for the exhibition *Costume and Contemplation on Religion* is girded with a belt/rosary. The rosary cross was replaced by the symbol of Venus (a circle above the cross ♀), the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. By introducing this symbol, I sought to evoke the divine feminine principle associated with the carnality that the Virgin Mother lacks.

An important element of the styling is a balaclava with a playful pompom, a nod to the style of the women in Pussy Riot. The balaclava is knitted and references traditional women's handicraft techniques, which were historically not regarded as artistic endeavors. Influenced by feminist activism in the art world, the subversive nature of activities such as embroidery, weaving, knitting, and sewing has been increasingly recognized.

The second element presented at the exhibition is a short film. The heroine of the animation accompanying the outfit is Mary, depicted after the figure in the painting *The Descent from the Cross* by the Dutch master Roger van der Weyden. A characteristic feature of this composition, dating from around 1435, is the diagonal arrangement of Christ's body, which the painter mirrored in the body of the falling Mary. This approach was intended to make the faithful realize that the mother shared her son's suffering. The swoon of the Virgin was an idea developed in the late Middle Ages. As Domenico Pietropaolo, professor of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto, explains: "The swoon was a part of semiotic code used by artists, writers and preachers to create an emotionally charged image of the *mater dolorosa* and to promote devout exercises in the empathic exploration of the sorrow."⁹ Pietropaolo further notes the popularity of this concept: "Fainting was very attractive to artists who wanted to show the role of Mary in the Passion of Christ, so much so that about half of the crucifixion paintings from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries depict the Virgin fainting."¹⁰

Van der Weyden's *Descent* was the most influential painting depicting the moment of the Virgin's swoon. This swooning was described by theologians with the word *spasimo*, meaning cramp or suffering. My response to this image of Mary is an animation in which she rises from suffering. Her resurrection is accompanied by a text taken from Radzik's book *Church of Women*: "Since the church is the bride, what if only women could represent it?"¹¹—the author asks cheekily. In this provocative question, one can read a postulate for women's priesthood and, consequently, a reassessment of the cultural narratives surrounding femininity.

In my film, Mary transforms into a rebel; she becomes a feminist, as Pussy Riot envisioned. At one point, a balaclava appears on her head, symbolizing rebellion. Subsequent frames show a multiplication of Mary figures, who seem to be marching in a demonstration, with a quote from a poem by Joanna Mueller appearing above their heads: "The Humble Furies. They are screaming, they who curtsied."¹²

9 Domenico Pietropaolo, *Semiotics of the Christian Imagination: Signs of the Fall and Redemption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 132.

10 Ibid., 133.

11 Radzik, *Kościół kobiet*, 261.

12 Joanna Mueller, "Myto," in *Waruj* (Kołobrzeg: Biuro Literackie, 2016), 53.

Reflections

The questions posed in the introduction are situated at the intersection of religion, feminism, and fashion. The central figure in this exploration is the Virgin Mary. I confronted this model of femininity, created by Christianity, with feminist thought. Being both a mother and a virgin is an unattainable ideal—a theological construct of patriarchal culture. The Virgin Mary as a feminist is a subversive concept, a pre-Christian goddess archetype brought back to life. Returning to the original understanding of virginity as a manifestation of autonomy frees us from the dogma of bodily purity. Through this interpretation, being religious no longer equates to passive submission; there is room for resistance and subversion, which I expressed in an intermedia project involving costume and film.

The research and design work described above did not conclude my internal dialogue. It led to new ideas and prompted me to explore other artistic media. In 2025, I created a series of photographs developing the idea of the “heretical” rosary. The rosary is a prayer object associated with Marian devotion, so it seemed necessary to emphasize the feminine element within it. The photographs, titled *Mysteries of the Rosary*, do not refer to the traditional mysteries established by the Church; rather, they seek the secret of a forgotten goddess. For this reason, rosaries are made from apple seeds (the forbidden fruit), breast milk, or a figurine of a priestess from Knossos.

Bio

Magdalena Samborska is a visual artist, fashion designer, and professor at the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Her work examines the role of women in the symbolic order and the relationship between fine and applied art. She creates photographs, films, and sculptural garments, exhibiting widely in Poland and abroad, and has been recognized with major national awards for the depth and innovation of her interdisciplinary practice.



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3. *Humble Fury*, outfit, project author Magdalena Samborska, from the author’s archive.







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Crochet Protest:

Feminist Craft
as Resistancen



Abstract

This article analyzes the connection between anxiety and crochet as a practice of feminist activism. By exploring the interaction between fashion and activism, it shows how the process of crochet can transform paralyzing anxiety into creative action, bringing together thought and handiwork to create collective and individual resistance. Historical and contemporary examples—from the suffragettes to present-day protests in the United States—demonstrate how handiwork serves as a form of nonviolent protest and social influence. Analyzing theoretical sources including Gruwell, Fitzpatrick, Sholette, and Arnold, the discussion underscores the interrelationship between materiality, identity, and creativity, which shapes social connections and strengthens collective consciousness. The article highlights the potential of craftivism in fashion as a reflective, ethical, and political practice in which art, handicraft, and activism intertwine, allowing individuals and communities to confront anxiety and actively create social transformation.

Keywords: anxiety, crochet, fashion, craftivism, feminism.

One Dot Difference

It is a curious coincidence that in Lithuanian, anxiety (*nerimas*) and crochet (*nėrimas*) differ by just one dot. Although at first glance they do not seem identical, they, in fact, have more similarities than differences. The *Universal Lithuanian Encyclopedia* defines anxiety (*nerimas*) as an emotional state marked by a sense of misfortune or threat arising from real or imagined danger.¹ Crochet (*nėrimas*) (as opposed to the related craft of knitting) lacks such a clear definition and is described similarly in different sources. In some of them, crochet is characterized as a type of handicraft in which fabric is formed from yarn, thread, or other material using needles, while some sources simply describe it as the creation of a net. It comes from the word *nerti*, which had a wide range of meanings: to join hands, to connect at a point of collision, to unite, to shed one's own skin, or even to dive into water without the possibility of resurfacing.² My archaic native language allows me to dive into these layered meanings, to study them more deeply, and to apply them in the context of artistic research.

1 *Nerimas*, Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/nerimas/>.

2 *Nerti*, Lietuvių kalbos žodynas, accessed September 27, 2025, <http://www.lkz.lt/?zodis=nerti&id=20027920000>.

As a fashion designer who began exploring the interaction between fashion and activism three years ago, while pursuing a doctorate in design at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, it is no coincidence that these two concepts—anxiety and crochet—intertwine in my practice as well.

I may have already revealed that I am based in Eastern Europe—no matter how much we would like to think of ourselves as northerners—in a country with a lesser-known but no less significant name: Lithuania. Its territory once extended almost to the Black Sea, and we have never forgotten that. There was also a time when Lithuania was erased from the world map, but we have not forgotten that either. Living beside an aggressor and sharing a complex but painful history, we can never lose our vigilance; history's repeated attempts to erase our country's borders, language, and identity have made sure of that. For these reasons, we celebrate more than one Independence Day. When Vladimir Putin launched a military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, everyone in Lithuania felt the pain—even those who had never been to Ukraine or lived under Soviet occupation. I was one of them. Although I had visited Ukraine once on a work trip, the morning I read about tanks crossing the country's border, the feeling of anxiety was immediate. It was the kind of anxiety that paralyzes, disconnects, and immobilizes—without a beginning or an end. I did not need to experience the weight of a Russian boot on my head or see the tanks with my own eyes. In that moment, the collective subconscious reawakened all the fears buried in our shared memory—the fears of my parents, grandparents, and neighbors, both those living next door and those across the state border. The fear was so overwhelming that it eventually turned into endless anxiety (*nerimas*), which continued until it was replaced by crochet (*nėrimas*).

In extreme situations, I turn to both. When anxiety forces me out of my own skin and I feel submerged, as though underwater, crochet helps me stay afloat—it gives my hands something to do and allows my thoughts to reconnect. It offers peace, even if only for a moment, and when it fades, I start again, repeating the motion until calm returns. About a year after the military invasion began, hopes for a quick resolution began to fade, and uncertainty remained frightening. Something had to be done, so I picked up a hook. A randomly discovered sunflower pattern served as a symbol of strength and endurance, much like in Ukrainian folklore. The crochet process felt even more intimate because, when I was a child, my mother used to call my father *Sunflower* (*Saulėgrąža*) and my friends called me *Siemka*—a slang term for a sunflower seed—playing on our family name. Initially I thought that all these coincidences were purely accidental, but later I realized that seeking refuge in handicraft is far from new. People—especially women—across continents and cultures have been doing this for many years.

The History of Feminism Written in Stitches

If one were to visit the Priest's House Museum in West Sussex, England, today, they would find an artifact reminiscent of the turbulent year of 1912, when women were sent to prison simply for demanding the right to vote. This artifact, the legendary *Suffragette Handkerchief*, has lost its whiteness over the years but still bears the names of sixty-seven women, testifying to the long struggle for equal rights. The names were embroidered while some of the women were serving sentences of two to six months for their activism, while others showed their determination by participating in hunger strikes, even as their resistance was met with brutal force-feeding. Although women in Lithuania obtained the right to vote a decade earlier than their counterparts in England, I remain grateful to all those women whose courage allows me to write these lines today.

When I say that the soothing of anxiety through handicraft is neither historically nor geographically confined, I do not exaggerate. In Chile, during nearly two decades of totalitarian military dictatorship, women expressed their fear through embroidery. Hunger, unemployment, and uncertainty about the fate of their loved ones and the future were captured in small-format embroidered scenes, usually created when people gathered together. The slow process of cutting and sewing allowed them to divert their attention, calm their minds, and document the horror-filled present at a time when all other forms of expression were prohibited. I do not compare myself to them—such a comparison would be pointless—but their example remains an excellent and deeply moving example of how manual labor can help one simply be.

Finally, we need not look very far—either in geography or in time. In 2017, anyone who could knit was invited to show solidarity with American women who spoke out against the administration of then-newly elected President Donald Trump. History is full of feminist struggles that began with individual action and spread like a virus, and this was one of the most striking examples. Two like-minded women came up with the idea of knitting pink hats with cat ears as a response to the president's misogynistic statements. They invited a third collaborator to design a pattern accessible to everyone—and soon, an estimated four million people marched in more than six hundred cities across the world. Sometimes anxiety is driven by fear, and sometimes, as in this case, it transforms into anger.

According to Leigh Gruwell, the existence of craft demonstrates that its power lies in the material environment, which is why political and ethical meanings—capable of both creating and destroying—are so important. She agrees with Kristin Pins, stating that the process of handcrafting embodies the complex relationship between the creator’s identity, their interaction with others, and the objects being created. It is noted that in English, the word *craft* functions as both a verb and a noun, reflecting this duality between the material practice of creation and its results. Even if these results are temporary, the practices themselves can foster long-term social connections, which over time may give rise to serious activist effects that encourage or even reinforce change.³

In the examples discussed above, materiality is primarily manifested in the presence of physical artifacts that testify to an anxiety-ridden desire to resist. Political forces seeking to destroy act as a catalyst for creation. Although the ways in which creators interact with their environment differ—some work individually and pass on their creations by word of mouth, others form physical communities, and still others form digital communities—they are united by a shared consequence: the process itself matters more than the result. Women would gather and stay until they left, in both cases leaving behind objects tinged with anxiety, accompanied by the belief that everything would be fine. Even if this did not solve immediate problems, this method allowed them to recognize the cultural and political value of their work, to revisit the boundaries between private and public, and to rethink the value of art and the meaning of protest. Over time, this approach became known as *craftivism*.

At the beginning, I mentioned that I am currently researching how fashion and activism can be related in my design PhD, so clear definitions help me not to get lost in the twists and turns of both my research and this text. Gregory Sholette, artist/activist/writer/educator (in the art world, people shy away from labels just as much as they like to adorn themselves with them), in his book *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*, critically examines the relationship between art and activism. He defines the latter as one of the few rapidly developing aspects of socially engaged, collective, or participatory art, attributing it to a new genre that can be described as participatory, relational, dialogical, or simply social practice. He argues that representatives of this genre usually work together, collaborating with other creators and activists who do not identify as belonging to the field of art.⁴ For my personal practice, which combines the principles of fashion design and creative intuition, this definition has always felt too narrow and even limiting, so I searched for a term that would more accurately reflect my activities. After discovering the word *craftivism*, everything fell into place—at least for the time being. Artistic research has a way of making you seek answers to problems you have invented yourself, only to ask once you find them, “Is that really true?”—instantly returning you to the initial point of uncertainty.

3 Leigh Gruwell, *Making Matters: Craft, Ethics, and New Materialist Rhetorics* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2022), 14.

4 Gregory Sholette, *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 2022), 12.

When defining the concept of craftivism, different authors almost always personalize it to reflect their own practices, as Tal Fitzpatrick did in their methodological guide *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology*. The guide notes that the term was first used by Betsy Greer, who defined craftivism as an approach to life that expresses opinion through creativity. Fitzpatrick found this definition too broad, so they refined and expanded it, adding that it is also a strategy of nonviolent activism—a form of independent citizenship that seeks to have a positive social and political impact. This unique twenty first-century practice combines craft techniques with elements of social and digital engagement to draw attention to pressing issues of justice and address them pragmatically.⁵ This perspective resonates with mine far more than Sholette's and gives me confidence in moments of doubt about whether my activism is... active enough. The work presented in the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation: On Religion* required considerable resources. I had to live in tension for a year to accumulate enough anxiety to start it. Using my knowledge of fashion design and trusting my creative intuition, I had to find the most suitable way to execute it, as well as choose the most effective color combination and silhouette. I completed this project during both working and leisure hours, often without realizing which were being used consciously and which were being sacrificed. However, even after this process, I found myself wondering whether spending three months crocheting squares every day, and then spending the same amount of time sewing them into a dress, could truly be considered activism. Nevertheless, this process calmed my mind and gave me the strength to accept a reality full of unknown threats. On the other hand, it did not solve anything—although I understand that wanting to end the war with a single dress would have been a bit too ambitious. Here, I consciously turn back to women who have found strength to continue in their crafts, and I remind myself that this has shaped a broad discourse throughout feminist theory, of which I am a part with my research. When I am unable to rationalize my doubts, I remember the words of my feminist friend: "It's clear that this is activism—remember how you almost destroyed a city with your sweater?" She said this when I told her that a cultural institution sharing my fashion activism project had received an unexpectedly stormy reaction. One photo blew up the social bubble, turned neighbors against each other, and earned me new friends and enemies who even offered to teach me a lesson physically. It is important to note that there were no yellow sunflowers on a blue background in that crochet pattern. The blue background framed yellow letters, in the language of the occupier, indicating where and how far they should go—but more on that another time.

5 Tal Fitzpatrick, *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology* (Melbourne: self-published, 2018), 3.

Costume & Contemplation: On Religion Reflections

As a creator, feminist, and activist, *Costume & Contemplation: On Religion* series allowed me to reflect on myself in multiple roles and to experience what it means to explore the interaction between fashion and activism: to conceive a work, to create it, and to place it in ambiguous contexts. The exhibition became a gateway, allowing me to venture into broader waters with my reflections and to check whether my thoughts were isolated. The conference offered time to voice these thoughts and discuss them with colleagues. This text is an attempt to crystallize everything and articulate what I previously had neither the time nor the space to express. However, even after all these experiences, I can firmly state that fashion activism remains a broad concept, meaning different things to different people depending on their circumstances. As Rebecca Arnold observes, fashion tends to reflect individual fragments of modern culture, erasing the boundaries of the hierarchical structures that existed before.⁶ This is exactly what happened in this project, when fashion merged multiple identities: Lithuanian, designer, activist, feminist. Even though my dress hung quietly in the exhibition, reflecting everything occurring around it, its realization—at moments when anxiety (*nerimas*) was replaced by crochet (*nėrimas*)—gave me faith that there is hope.

Bio

Justina Semčenkaitė is a fashion designer and a PhD candidate in Design at Vilnius Academy of Arts, specializing in sustainability. . Her conceptual work addresses social issues through a bright, surreal, and ironic style, exploring stereotypes, activism, and experimental design. She also coordinates Fashion Revolution Lithuania, promoting ethical and fair fashion.



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1-3. *Blue-Yellow*, project author Justina Semčėnkaitė, photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė and Rusnė Šimulynaitė





SEMČENKAITĖ ILTU

2023. Vilnia

Problemi, sukursmas, revoliucijos – tai kasdienis gyvenimas, mokytojų patirties kilmę, tarsi ir lygialygiu pasiekiamas **DEKLATYVUS** žmogijos gyvenimo, industrializmo revoliucija leidžia žmogui atsivaduoti nuo kitos darys, seksualinės revoliucijos išlikimo kilmę nuo gamtos, stigmatų į kanceros, o skaitmeninė revoliucija iš esmės negalima pakeisti socialinio ekonomikos. Tai pakeičia, patvirtina studijas istorijos funkcionalizmo (tyrimas) ir etnologijos esmę, leidžia visuomenės išsivystimą.

Jei tai bus pirmas žingsnis

[illegible]

Austria Samorostské – družstvo ozáření, Vinnus další akademický tvrdus madus disciplinos lektore i madus agnoscimelike. Eius matu dcaio doktoratoropie plebsant madus eklysiuonis ling. korylate velike – konceptuall madus obvelit kuzinas huzurto korylate, socialit madus pudumit glina, jassionit lissagry madus strepsit pudumit, korylate bradice – rykise, suamalistice i avraliste. Ozáření jst larymureno tveros madus pudumit FASHION REVOLUTION astutis Lufeluge.

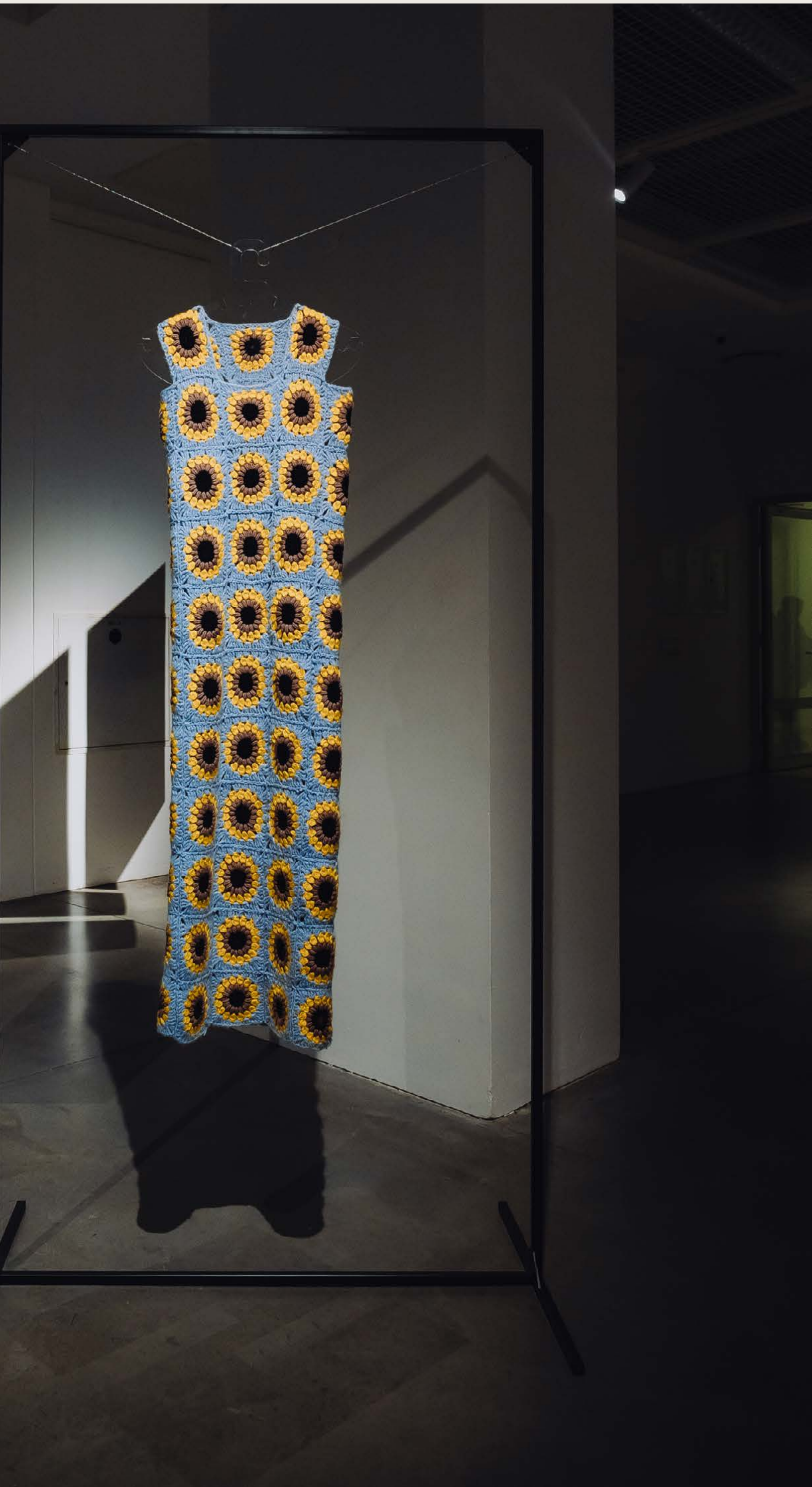
2023. Wood

2023. Wood

Progress, uprisings, and revolutions are key events that occur when a critical point is reached, rewriting the history of mankind with long-term consequences. The Industrial Revolution allowed humanity to move away from manual labor, the Sexual Revolution freed the body from long-standing stigmas and canons, and the Digital Revolution fundamentally altered the social economy in an irreversible way. These are changes that can shake historically formed dogmas and respond to the expectations of contemporary society. If you believe.

The object of *KNITS OF ACTIVISM* invites viewers to explore activism and seek ways that fashion can contribute to it in all its forms of expression. The desire to speak, question, and critically assess established truths, using fashion design as a communicative tool, remains one of the primary creative motivations and methods of communication with the audience. The exhibit represents activism through different forms of fashion design, such as color, sought after silhouettes, and eye-catching inscriptions.

Justina Sericenkaitė is a fashion designer, design doctoral candidate and member at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, a lecturer in the Fashion Design Department, a sustainable fashion specialist. In her doctoral studies, she explores the theme of fashion activism. The designer creates conceptual fashion objects within the context of sustainability issues and advocates social fashion movements. She is the representative of the international sustainable fashion movement FASHION REVOLUTION in Lithuania.



Michał Szulc

Academy
of Fine Arts
in Łódź



Unio.

Transforming
the Rule of
the Sisters of
Saint Clare into
fashion objects.



Abstract

The article examines a design-led research project exploring the intersection of fashion, religion, and contemporary subculture. Drawing on the head coverings of the Poor Clares and the visual language of BDSM masks, the project investigates how acts of covering and disciplining the body function across spiritual and profane contexts. Historical analysis of veils in Christian tradition is juxtaposed with the evolution of fetish masks to reveal shared symbolic structures such as anonymity, transformation, and controlled visibility. Through digital collage, sculpting and hand-sewn cotton forms preserved with water glass, the study generates hybrid objects situated between garment, sculpture, and artifact. The project is further framed by Władysław Strzemiński's theory of Unism, emphasizing material unity and visual asceticism. Unio demonstrates how fashion practice can serve as a critical tool for interpreting cultural rituals, embodied identity, and the tension between devotion and transgression.

Key words: nun's head coverings, Poor Clares, Saint Clare, sacred and profane, BDSM masks, Unism

Introduction

Fashion has been a natural area of my creative activity for the past twenty years. Until now, both when developing my own collections and working for major Polish and European brands, I have remained on the safe ground of functionality and utility, effectively separating the profane from the sacred. Reflecting on religion and religiosity in the context of fashion allowed me to open up to new areas I had previously overlooked and to reinterpret the design process. This resulted in research carried out for the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, culminating in two works created specifically for this purpose.

My reflections can be divided into two interconnected stages. Each derives from the other, and neither would have had such a strong impact on the final objects without the counterpoint introduced by the contrasting perspective of the second. The coexisting design paths, direct inspiration drawn from the head coverings of the Poor Clares and aesthetic references to sadomasochistic masks, intertwined in objects hand-sewn from cotton fabric woven in Łódź, the city where I was born and where I work. This provides an additional interpretive layer, which I intentionally leave open to the viewer's creative exploration.

Initially, the field of inspiration was narrowed to clothing. My attempt to identify a point of contact between fashion and religion may appear somewhat naive, yet it seemed natural in the context of my previous work. Simultaneously, I realized that it would be more challenging to base the project on an element with fixed boundaries: one that is not subject to contemporary change and has a long history that has already passed through stages of evolution. Guided by my first association, I began by analyzing nuns' attire. During this research I encountered a passage from the 11th Rule of Saint Francis:

"They shall cover their heads equally and modestly with headbands and veils of plain white cloth, but not expensive or refined, so that their foreheads, cheeks, necks, and throats are covered, as befits modest persons."

Located in the fourth chapter of the Rule of Saint Clare, this statement directed my attention specifically to head coverings, which subsequently became the focus of my research.

Head coverings worn by nuns are the most distinctive and recognizable element of their attire, a marker of identity and belonging. Their forms have changed across centuries, serving to distinguish individual congregations. Yet their meaning has remained constant.

Their origins lie in Judaism and the cultures of the ancient Middle East. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, the covered head signified modesty and submission to God. Consecrated women: widows, virgins, and nuns wore head coverings during prayer and communal life. The first veils were extremely simple, most often made of linen or wool. Over time, their form evolved in parallel with changes in secular clothing and religious practice. The Middle Ages introduced some of the most spectacular and elaborate shapes, though not created for decorative purposes. They were inherited from secular women's clothing and preserved by religious communities long after they disappeared from everyday fashion. Using starched structures, parchment, paper stiffeners, and multiple layers, they acquired sculptural forms that survived until the early twentieth century. Their decorative appearance became fixed due to the Church's emphasis on immutability: habits were meant to be durable, timeless, and resistant to the influence of changing fashions.

Head coverings served multiple functions. Symbolically, they expressed the vow of chastity and the nun's union with Christ. Covering the head separated the sisters from worldly temptations and signified humility. It also indicated belonging to a community: white veils signaled a novice, black those who had professed vows. Practically, head coverings protected the wearer from cold and sun, kept hair tidy, and reinforced community discipline.

Historically, the forms of nuns' head coverings evolved dynamically. In the Middle Ages, veils were wide, long, and draped, resembling contemporary secular attire. The wimpel, covering the neck and chin, became widespread in Western Europe. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, many congregations developed distinctive, often elaborate styles. In the nineteenth century, with the emergence of new apostolic congregations, simpler bonnets and shorter veils appeared, allowing greater mobility. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) recommended moderation and simplicity, which led to shorter veils and the abandonment of stiffeners. In some communities, the traditional habit was replaced by secular clothing accompanied by a symbolic veil, or the head covering was eliminated entirely.

Since the 1970s three tendencies have prevailed: first of all - preservation of traditional forms, especially in contemplative and more traditional apostolic communities. Secondly, simplification, popular in congregations active in medical, educational, or missionary work. The next one was departing from head coverings, widely seen in congregations that have adopted secular dress and emphasize spiritual rather than material expressions of consecration.

The Order of Saint Clare

Saint Clare (1193–1253), inspired by the spirituality of Saint Francis, founded the Order of Saint Clare and established a rule approved in 1263. Candidates took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. To this day, the sisters live in enclosure, do not leave the convent, renounce property, and devote their lives to prayer, contemplation, and inner spiritual growth. Their habit, usually black or dark grey, consists of a dress, scapular, and a belt or cord with three knots symbolizing the vows. A veil completes the ensemble, with variations depending on the monastery and stage of formation.

Clare's recommendations regarding attire reflect the Franciscan spirit: poverty, modesty, and rejection of luxury. These guidelines appear in the *Form of Life* (Rule) approved in 1253, in the earliest constitutions, and in hagiographic sources, especially Thomas of Celano's *Life of Saint Clare*. The Rule does not provide a detailed description of the habit, but it specifies that the fabric must be simple and inexpensive, prohibiting costly, shiny, or elaborate materials. The veil forms part of the poor habit; it covers the hair but must never serve as ornament.

BDSM

The Rule of Saint Clare, particularly the passage insisting on covering the head and part of the face, evoked associations with a mask. To create a contrasting narrative for the exhibition objects, I turned to a controversial yet unexpectedly parallel theme: the contemporary mask within BDSM practices.

The origins of masks used in modern BDSM are layered and complex, shaped by historical, cultural, psychological, and technological influences. The act of covering the face in rituals of domination, punishment, or transition predates the BDSM subculture by centuries. In many tribal cultures, masks were used during initiation rites to suspend everyday identity and induce a liminal state. Though not erotic, these practices linked masks with transformation, power, and altered states of being.

In Europe, disciplinary masks, such as shame masks, functioned as instruments of public punishment. Though designed for social control, they introduced the concept of facial covering as a mechanism of subjugation, establishing a precedent for later erotic interpretations in domination–submission dynamics.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of fetish culture. Authors such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and publications like *Bizarre* popularized imagery of leather and rubber masks symbolizing anonymity, control, and the suspension of individual identity — conditions enabling freer exploration of fantasy.

The development of rubber and plastics in the interwar period and after World War II enabled the creation of airtight, flexible latex masks — now iconic within BDSM culture. Their psychological function grew in importance, fostering isolation, intensification of sensory experience, and separation from ordinary life.

The 1960s and 1970s brought further evolution. Within queer, leather, and pup-play communities, masks became tools for creating alternative subjectivities and critiquing normative sexual and social roles. They also became identifiers of belonging within specific subcultures.

Today, BDSM masks combine practical, psychological, and aesthetic functions. They regulate sensory stimuli, reinforce hierarchical roles, and serve as performative objects within a long visual tradition. They are not simply products of the erotic market but artifacts shaped by rituals, punishment practices, modern fetishism, and subcultural aesthetics.

Collage

The collected visual materials enabled the next stages of work. By combining elements from nuns' head coverings, transforming them in graphic programs, and introducing deformations and anatomical divisions inspired by BDSM aesthetics, I developed hybrid forms.

The most interesting designs were selected and translated into three-dimensional form. Using a polystyrene head as a base, I shaped glued cotton fabric into compositions that faithfully reflected the digital designs.

The final stage involved hand-sewing the components. To consolidate and protect the objects, I searched for an appropriate coating and ultimately applied water glass, which gave the cotton a fragile, glossy finish. The resulting cracks made the objects resemble historical artifacts.

Unio

The combination of all these conceptual elements, together with the intention to work sculpturally, evokes the unist concept of Władysław Strzemiński, patron of the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Developed in the 1920s and articulated in the treatise *Unism in Painting* (1928), Unism sought maximum homogeneity within a work of art. It eliminated elements that might introduce division, narrative, spatial illusion, or contrasting accents. For Strzemiński, a painting was to be a “uniform organism,” with every part equally important and free of hierarchical tensions.

In practice, this meant minimal tonal, rhythmic, and color variation. Strzemiński’s unist paintings are characterized by subtle shifts, repetitions, and the absence of compositional focal points. He treated Unism as a visual asceticism. A tool for studying perception by removing elements that disrupted homogeneity.

The interplay of concepts explored throughout the research. Religious symbolism, ritual covering, fetishistic masking, and sculptural uniformity culminated in the objects presented at the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*. The exhibition was accompanied by a film in which Karolina Sulej — Polish writer, feminist, anthropologist, and journalist specializing in fashion — reads a passage from the Rule of Saint Clare that served as the point of departure for the project.



Michał Szulc is a fashion designer, educator, and researcher with a PhD in Arts. He

is an assistant professor at the Institute of Fashion Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where he served as Head of the Institute from 2020 to 2024. He founded his own fashion brand in 2005 and has presented his collections at FashionPhilosophy Fashion Week Poland as well as in solo shows in Warsaw. His work has been featured in numerous fashion magazines, and he is a two-time recipient of a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture. In addition to his design practice, Szulc curates fashion exhibitions in Poland and across Europe, including in Łódź, Vilnius, Prague, Oslo, and Lyon, and teaches in sustainable fashion programmes supported by the Ministry of Culture.



List of illustrations

1. *Unio 1, Unio 2*, project
author Michat Szulc,
photography by Vaiva
Abromaitytė

2. *Unio 2*, project
author Michat Szulc,
photography by Vaiva
Abromaitytė

3. *Unio 1*, project
author Michat Szulc,
photography by Vaiva
Abromaitytė









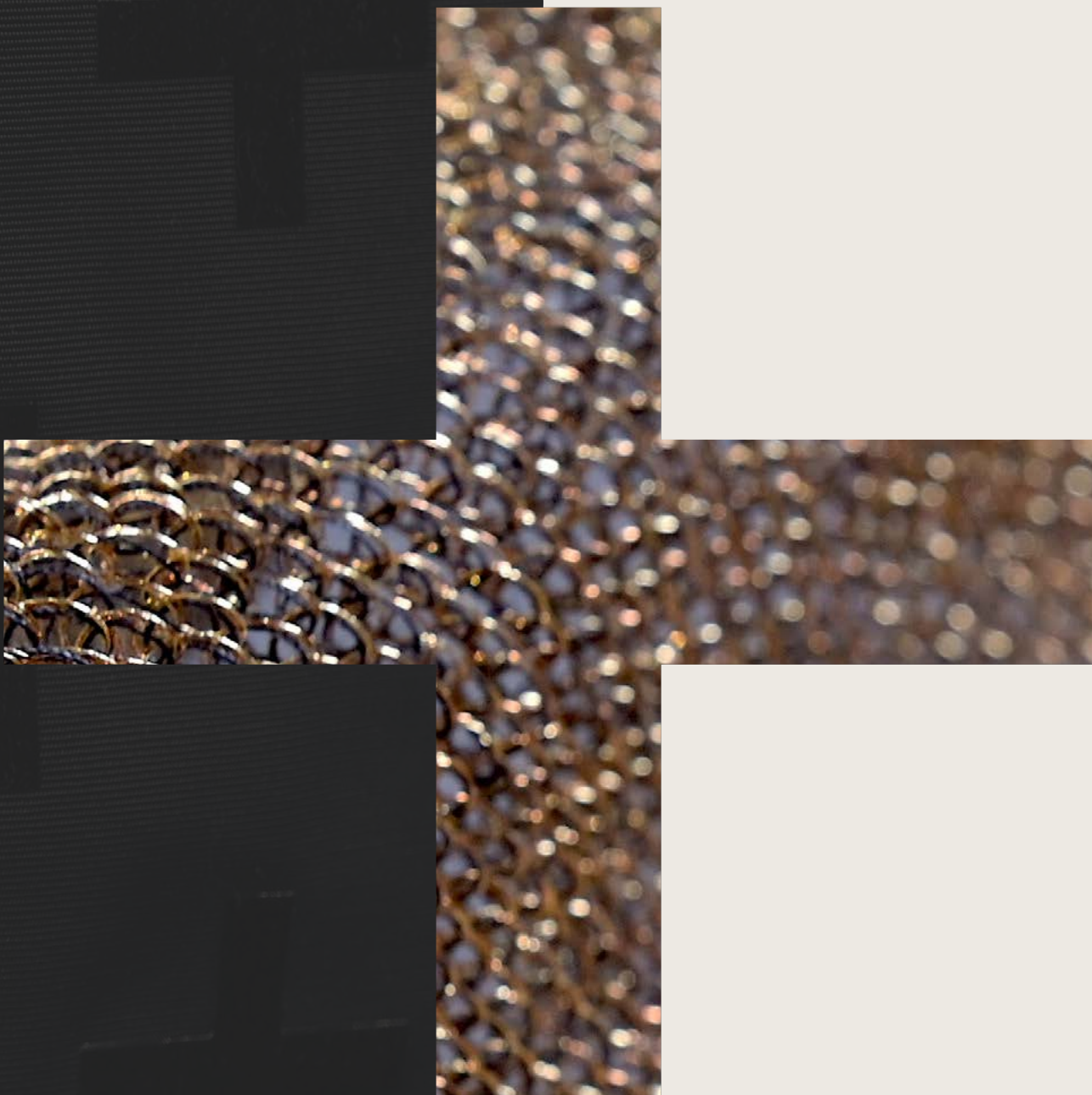
Galvėtiną Sąjėpianovą Edita Sąbookytė- Skudienė



Vilnius
Academy
of Arts

Human + Plant Creative Partnership:

Principles of
sustainability
and ethics in
bio art and bio
design practice



Abstract

This artistic research examines human–plant creative partnerships within the contexts of bio art and bio design, focusing on the principles of collaboration, partnership, and synergy within creative teams. The study is motivated by the rise of interdisciplinary projects and the potential to integrate biological processes as active co-creators, thereby expanding traditional notions of creative collaboration.

The research aims to explore how trust, shared direction, and synergy develop within creative teams, leading to unique artistic outcomes, and examines how these principles manifest both among human collaborators and between humans and biological creation partners. The objectives include analyzing the dynamics of creative team relationships, demonstrating these principles through our collaborative artistic practice, and investigating engagement with the environment and local communities.

Methodologically, the study follows artistic research principles, wherein practice serves both as a research tool and as an outcome. Data were collected through process documentation—including photographs, notes, and sketches—from initial concept development to final works, complemented by reflexive analysis and the study of biological objects. Participation in the international *BigCi* art residency in Australia enabled collaboration with local communities, fellow artists, and ecological contexts, further expanding the creative team concept.

The findings reveal that a triadic creative team—artists-collaborators, and biological creation—produces synergy, generating outcomes greater than the sum of individual contributions. Biological processes function as active co-creators, shaping form, texture, and visual expression, and extending traditional notions of authorship and creative boundaries. The study also emphasizes sustainability and ethical considerations, demonstrating responsible and ecologically sensitive artistic practice. Overall, this research presents an innovative approach to creative team interaction and highlights the potential of integrating biological partners in contemporary artistic practice, addressing both artistic and ecological challenges of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: collaboration, partnership, synergy, bio art, bio design.

Introduction

The object of this artistic research is the interaction and structure¹ of a creative team, understood as a system of interrelated elements in which creators and their creations become equal participants. In our practice, the creative team consists not only of us, the artist-partners, but also the biological creative objects with which we engage in the context of bio art and bio design.

The research problem arises from a dilemma inherent in creative practice: whether an artist should remain solitary, generating ideas independently and according to personal discretion, or operate within a creative team, where individual voices must be harmonized toward a common goal. Partnership with another artist is rarely straightforward—it requires constant negotiation of individuality and shared objectives, objectivity in decision-making, and openness to different perspectives. Yet this journey also offers significant advantages: it enables the sharing of creative insights and responsibilities, mutual support, and the creation of a stronger, more enriched artistic outcomes.

Within the structure of a creative team, we identify three fundamental principles of relational development: collaboration, partnership, and synergy. Collaboration ensures practical continuity and task sharing; partnership fosters long-term relationships based on trust and shared values; and synergy allows for creative outcomes that exceed the sum of individual contributions. Our experience shows that these principles can be applied not only among humans but also between humans and creative objects when the latter assume the role of active co-creators.

The relevance of this research is determined by several factors. First, contemporary art increasingly embraces interdisciplinary projects, where the integration of multiple competencies makes the analysis of creative team interactions strategically important. Second, bio art and bio design, as innovative artistic fields, provide opportunities to expand the concept of the creative team by incorporating biological processes as creative partners. Third, within the context of artistic research, this approach offers a new perspective on relational development—from initial contact to the realization of the final artwork—revealing how trust and shared direction shape unique artistic outcomes.

The aim of this research is to analyze the creative concept² and process³ through the lens of relational development, illustrating how trust and collective direction emerge within a creative team and lead to unique artistic results, as well as how this system operates at both human and object levels.

1 Alois Halder, *Filosofijos žodynas* (Vilnius: Alma littera, 2002), 199; Aldona Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2008), 709.

2 Antanas Andrijauskas et al., *Estetikos enciklopedija* (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2010), 394.

3 Ibid., 330–31.

The objectives are:

To analyze the principles of relational development within creative teams.

To demonstrate how these principles manifest in our practice through creative partnership, collaborative creation, synergy, and interaction with the environment and other participants.

The research methodology is based on artistic research principles, where creative practice serves both as the research tool and its outcome. The processes are documented visually and textually—from idea inception to final work—using photographs, notes, sketches, and reflective analysis. This approach allows for the examination of relational dynamics that are not immediately visible, as well as decision-making processes, emotional and creative challenges, and discoveries. Community and contextual analysis highlight interactions during the *BigCi*⁴ residency with local communities and specialists, demonstrating how the expansion of the creative team can include environmental resources and knowledge. Analysis of the creative object presents biological entities as outcomes of the creative process, biological factors, partnership, and synergy.

Principles of Relational Development within Creative Teams

The structure of a system⁵ is such that all components are both individual and interconnected, organized according to specific rules and principles.⁶ Relational development principles refer to the systematic organization of social and ethical states. In our creative team, we identify three essential principles of relational development: collaboration, partnership, and synergy. These principles are sequentially interconnected: collaboration evolves into partnership, which in turn generates synergy, creating value that surpasses individual contributions. Framing these principles within a system allows the process to be perceived not as a chain of random events but as a structured, coherent pattern.

4 Bilpin International Ground for Creative Initiatives (BigCi). Accessed July 14, 2025. <https://bigci.org/>.

5 Halder, *Filosofijos žodynas*, 191–92; Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas*, 683.

6 Halder, *Filosofijos žodynas*, 170; Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas*, 601.

Collaboration⁷ is defined as the practical act of sharing tasks and providing mutual support. It represents the initial stage in which creators exchange ideas and engage in improvisation.

Partnership⁸ refers to a long-term, value-driven creative relationship. Within this stage, each participant's contribution and strengths are respected, and a consistent creative direction is established.

Synergy⁹ is the phenomenon whereby the collective creative output exceeds the sum of individual contributions. This stage produces new and unexpected results that would not have emerged from individual efforts alone.

These principles can be understood as functional mechanisms¹⁰ within a creative team's structure. Collaboration ensures practical continuity and task distribution, partnership fosters enduring, trust-based relationships, and synergy enables creative outcomes that go beyond the contributions of any single team member.

⁷ *Psichologijos žodynas* (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidykla, 1993), 42–43.

⁸ Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas*, 554.

⁹ Ibid., 680; Andrijauskas et al., *Estetikos enciklopedija*, 558–560.

¹⁰ Halder, *Filosofijos žodynas*, 129; Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas*, 465.

Manifestation of Relational Development Principles in Our Creative Practice

We are artists working in **partnership**, collaborating continuously since 2015. It is essential for us to harmonize our individuality with shared objectives, requiring both spontaneity and objectivity in decision-making. Partnership with another artist is rarely straightforward, given individual traits and differing perspectives, yet it significantly facilitates a successful creative journey: if one of us falters, the other provides support, encompassing not only physical but also emotional resilience. At this stage, collaboration as task-sharing becomes less central, while partnership—rooted in trust and shared values—takes precedence. We also emphasize the aspect of mutual attunement,¹¹ uniting us through artistic expression, concept development, aesthetics, and the realization of ideas.

In our research, we expand the composition of the creative team to a triadic model: the team includes not only us, the artist-partners, but also biological creative objects, which play an active role in the context of bio art and bio design. **Collaborative creation is our primary approach, aimed at co-creating and working in synergy with plants.** We develop and evolve creative ideas for bio art and bio design projects, exploring the relationship between humans and nature, responding to cultural and artistic shifts. This relationship has undergone significant transformations throughout history, particularly within the Anthropocene¹² era, characterized by mass extinction and climate change.

Today, bio art¹³ and bio design¹⁴ function as umbrella terms encompassing diverse practices and research. A key method integrates biological processes and ecosystem cycles into artistic and design practices, generating new artistic visions. Our formula can be represented as:

11 Andrijauskas et al., *Estetikos enciklopedija*, 467–73.

12 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: glausta rytojaus istorija* (Vilnius: Kitos knygos, 2018), 70; William Myers, *Bio Art: Altered Realities* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 7.

13 Ibid., 6.

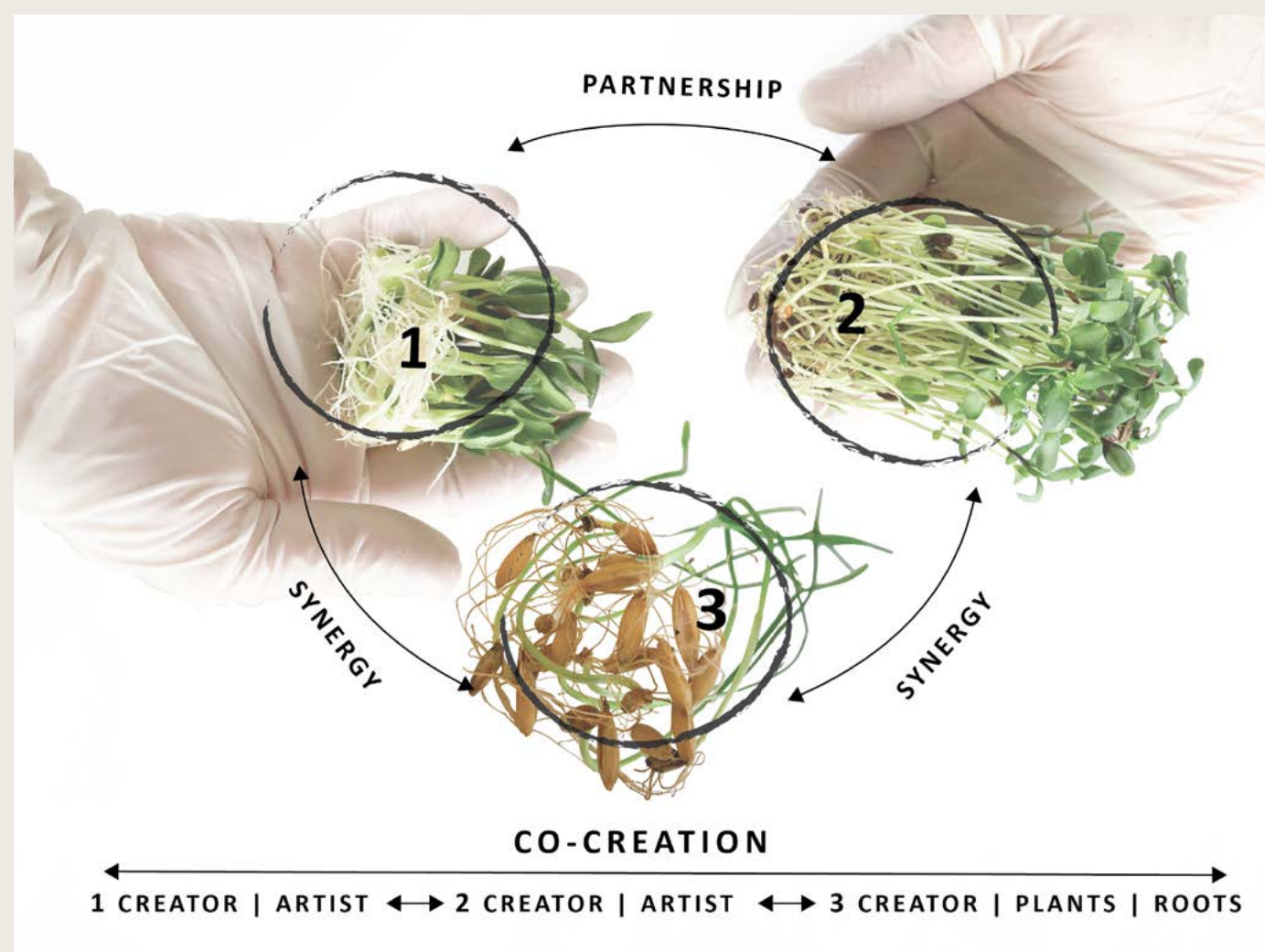
14 William Myers, *Bio Design: Nature, Science, Creativity* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2023), 8.

CREATOR / ARTIST (human) + CREATOR / ARTIST (human) +
CREATOR / PLANT (ROOTS) = COLLABORATIVE CREATION [Fig. 1].

In this process, human collaborators and the creative object co-create. Our primary aim is to cultivate and document artworks at specific stages of vegetation without impacting native ecosystems. Here, biological material is employed as an artistic medium,¹⁵ with living processes integrated into textiles, knitting, and conventional fashion practices. Organic textiles become visual, tactile, and olfactory codes¹⁶—mediators¹⁷ between the artist and the audience—preserving the narratives we construct.

Our work *Organic Darning* invites each participant to reflect on their own life, dedicating time to the contemplation and “darning” of personal experiences and events. It evokes the anticipation of spring, grounded in new hope, reflection, and meditation. This period of waiting becomes a symbol of renewal and resurrection—aligned with the season of Lent,¹⁸ a time for introspection and repentance, akin to retreating into a desert. It encourages preparation for meaningful actions, life reflection, and internal transformation, cleansing the heart.

The biological object naturally generates its own form and texture: root systems create patterns reminiscent of lines drawn by hand, controlled or spontaneous, conveying narratives through a visual “language.” In this way, the concept of the creative team is extended: human collaborators, artistic partners, and the created object all function as active participants, achieving synergy, where the value¹⁹ of creation exceeds the sum of individual contributions.



¹⁵ Andrijauskas et al., *Estetikos enciklopedija*, 393–94.

¹⁶ John Fiske, *Įvadas į komunikacijos studijas* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1998), 34–38.

¹⁷ Bendorienė et al., *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas*, 466.

¹⁸ Birutė Kulnytė and Elvyda Lazauskaitė. *Lietuvių etnografijos enciklopedinis žodynas* (Vilnius: Lietuvos nacionalinis muziejus, 2015), 82.

¹⁹ Halder, *Filosofijos žodynas*, 229–30; *Psichologijos žodynas*, 324–25.

Collaboration with the Environment and Other Participants: Our Experience at the BigCi Art Residency

From January to February 2024, we participated in the *BigCi* art residency in Bilpin, Australia, an international, non-profit program supporting creative initiatives, professional development, and the promotion of artists' projects. *BigCi* is a member of *Res Artis*, a global network of artist residencies with 700 members from 85 countries, collaborating with numerous Australian and international art organizations. The residency was founded and is directed by artist Rae Bolotin, who established it as a centre for professional artistic development, receiving the Creative Leader award from the Blue Mountains Creative Artists Network (BMCAN) in 2018.

Located on the edge of Wollemi National Park, within the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Greater Blue Mountains region—one of the world's major biodiversity hotspots—*BigCi* focuses on pressing environmental issues and the human–nature relationship in the Anthropocene, a period in which human activity significantly impacts the environment. Selected artists addressing ecological concerns participate in exhibitions, workshops, and seminars as part of the residency. Participation enables like-minded artists to share perspectives, ideas, challenges, and ambitions.

Our engagement in the residency highlighted the importance and potential of collaboration with both the environment and other stakeholders, demonstrating its significance in achieving intended and final project outcomes. The local community and the residency operate in close partnership, making the utilization of local resources and opportunities essential. This collaborative and partnership approach greatly facilitated the realization of our artistic objectives.

Given Australia's biosecurity regulations, importing certain materials posed significant challenges; in particular, bringing seeds and raw wool—our primary creative resources—was prohibited. In this context, the residency director provided essential support, connecting us with local community members who supplied the necessary materials and information. We were introduced to the initiatives of the *Bilpin Seed Savers* community, a notable example of voluntary local engagement where community members share not only seeds but also knowledge of cultivation and conservation. Such enthusiastic volunteer communities are united across Australia by the *Seed Savers Connect*²⁰ organization, which promotes seed preservation and facilitates knowledge exchange among experts nationwide.

Local community members generously shared expertise on seed germination, raw wool acquisition, and natural dyeing using local organic materials. The added value of this collaboration included: environmental assessment → development of a critical relationship with the surroundings → active, meaningful participation in community activities → joint work with residency organizers, fellow resident artists, and the local community on ecological issues → sharing best practices → skill development. This experience demonstrated that expanding collaboration beyond the immediate team can further broaden the concept of the creative team and reveal the potential for both social and ecological partnerships.

Conclusions

This artistic research revealed that the concept of a creative team can be expanded into a triadic structure, including artist-partners and biological creative objects. This model redefines the traditional understanding of creative teams by incorporating natural processes as equal creative partners.

The principles of relational development—collaboration, partnership, and synergy—were validated as universal operational principles for creative interaction. The study showed that in long-term artist partnerships, collaboration evolves into partnership, which then becomes synergy, producing outcomes exceeding individual contributions.

In the context of bio art and bio design, biological processes act as active creative partners, generating form, texture, and visual expression. This expands the notion of authorship and allows for a reconceptualization of artistic and design processes.

Sustainability and ethical considerations are inseparable from artistic practice; works are cultivated without interfering with local ecosystems. This approach reinforces responsible and ecologically sensitive design practices.

The *BigCi* residency experience demonstrated that collaboration with local communities, organizers, and fellow artists enhances the quality of the creative process, expands the concept of the creative team, and reveals the potential for social and ecological partnerships.

The research indicates that synergistic collaboration between humans and biological processes is a productive strategy, generating innovative artistic practices that respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene and enable sustainable models for the development of art and design.

Bio

Alevtina Ščepanova is a fashion designer and an associate professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts with extensive experience in the industry.

Edita Sabockyte-Skudienė is a fashion designer and educator with a strong background in managing art education programmes. Working together since 2015, the duo explores sustainability and ecology through bio art and bio design, presenting their work in local and international conferences and exhibitions.



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Morphing in Art and Fashion:

An
Interdisciplinary
Creative Practice



Introduction

This research presents the creative process behind the art film *Prologue: The Silent Architects*, the creative outcome of a practice-based doctoral study in design titled *Morphing as the Core of the Creative Process*. The project explores the process of transformation—morphing—and the dynamic interaction between movement, the human body, and wearable objects within a creative space. In doing so, it aims to investigate and reveal the possibilities of merging fashion with other disciplines.

Personal experience in dance and fashion inspired an inquiry into how movement and material shape one another. Instead of producing objects intended merely to be worn, the study examines how the act of wearing itself becomes a process of becoming—both aesthetically and emotionally. The morphing process, first encountered in the field of architecture, proved directly proportional to the developed morphing method and became its methodological foundation. As Kostas Terzidis—educator, designer, theorist, architect, and computer scientist—writes in his article “Hybrid Form,” “Morphing is a term used to describe the process by which an object gradually changes its form [...].”¹ In this research, the method is applied to fashion design to explore how wearable, kinetic forms emerge through the interaction between subject and object.

Morphivity

By focusing on continuous transformation within the process, the research introduces the new concept of morphivity. Combining morphing (gradual transformation) and creativity, this neologism describes a state in which an object is never final but always in the process of becoming. In this study, morphivity did not arise as a theoretical construct but as a practical necessity—a term for the strange intermediate states that appear during experimentation with objects. It serves as an interpretation, a reflection on the friction between form and function, fiction and labor, body and tool.

This perspective aligns with process philosophy, in which form, identity, and materiality are understood as essentially mutable. It is a philosophical approach where processes, changes, and shifting relations are recognized as the only genuine reality of lived experience.² Thus, the phenomenon of morphivity points to the primacy of process over the final result in artistic research. In this way, the creative process itself becomes a kind of creative object, even though the artistic object continues to morph, constantly altering its expressive form. Along the way, the process pauses at certain phases—capturing a transitional frame or stage where the research object resides at that moment.

The underlying assumption of the process is that everything is in constant motion. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, a contemporary of Parmenides, declared that the essence of all things is change: “All beings move and nothing remains still.”³ German-born American philosopher, polymath, and professor Nicholas Rescher interprets Heraclitus’ notions in contemporary terms:

...reality is not at all a constellation of things but of processes. The fundamental ‘thing’ in the world is not a material substance but an unstable flow, namely ‘fire,’ and all things are its versions. Process is essential: the river is not an object but an ongoing flow; the sun is not a thing but a perpetual fire. Everything is a matter of process, activity, change.⁴

Thus, although the artistic objects produced through morphing in the course of the creative process are tangible, their essence lies in constant flux. It is as if we are following two threads of movement—an inner one, the process of creating a kinetic object, and an outer one, the morphivity of artistic research.

² Johanna Seibt, “Process Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2012).

³ Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

⁴ Nicholas Rescher, *Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Issues* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 5.

About the Film

The art film *Prologue: The Silent Architects* was presented at the exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, alongside the costume worn by the character in the film. The title *Prologue* reflects the state of the research, marking a stage where all key process elements have been identified and symbolically granting permission to move forward. The film's narrative is framed through the lens of the ancient astronaut myth, addressing the interweaving of past, present, and future.

The concept of ancient astronauts (or ancient aliens) refers to a set of pseudoscientific beliefs suggesting that intelligent extraterrestrial beings visited Earth and interacted with humans in antiquity and prehistoric times. Proponents claim that such contact influenced the development of modern cultures, technologies, religions, and even human biology. The general position is that the deities of most, if not all, religions are of extraterrestrial origin, and that the advanced technologies brought to Earth by these visitors were interpreted by early humans as proof of divine status.⁵

In the film, these ideas are employed as metaphorical elements highlighting the intersection of otherworldly origins, human imagination, and creativity. Humanity's constant desire to give a face and image to celestial life inspired the creation of a character interpreted as an extraterrestrial being. This human-shaped figure wears a kinetic headpiece, a flexible, feathered object that functions as a multilayered symbol: head ornament, accessory, burden, marker of divinity, partner, totem, inevitability. Through its flapping motion, the construction evokes the allegory of a bird in flight—a symbol of a fleeting encounter with otherworldly life. Its vivid green-yellow hue recalls the distant glow of celestial bodies.

The timeframe of events is deliberately ambiguous. As the character moves through various spaces, a window opens from boundless emptiness into an episode of the past. The depiction of Lithuanian rural landscapes is intentional, contrasting sharply with the intense, futuristic figure of the character. To bridge these opposing poles, the film draws on music, color, direction, and choreography. Here, dance takes on the role of language—a means to tell a story without words, conveying human experience through gesture and movement. The astronaut's movement speaks of humanity's evolution, the diversity of relationships, and the capacity to discover and invent.

5 Michael Lieb, "The Psycho-pathology of the Bizarre," in *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 51–54, 249–51.

Subtly orchestrated with surreal elements, the film emphasizes the interdisciplinarity of artistic research and encourages viewers to question the origins and meaning of the work. It invites reflection on the interplay between ancient beliefs and cosmic phenomena, urging audiences to reconsider their understanding of reality and sparking the imagination to reveal the complexity of existence. The making of the film not only exposes the interaction between movement and matter but also becomes an experiment in interdisciplinary practice, blending theater, dance, cinema, and fashion.

Fashion Context

In fashion, avant-garde and experimental forms, unconventional materials and techniques are nothing new—these tools enable designers to communicate their ideas to audiences more vividly and profoundly. Yet, for me, something was always missing. At runway shows, I repeatedly observed the human factor: collections created over long hours were presented by models who often had never stood on a stage before. I realized that this was largely due to limited budgets, lack of organizational experience, and other reasons that had little to do with the creative process itself.

Over time, I came to understand that what matters most to me is the human being—not external appearance, but character, emotion, and bodily awareness. It is encouraging that today, the fashion industry includes more charismatic, dynamic, and passionate individuals capable of conveying designers' creations while adding extra value and a unique aura. For this reason, I consciously distanced myself from traditional fashion events, connecting my creative work instead with theater, dance, and cinema.

Nevertheless, since the field of fashion is constantly evolving, it can be confidently stated that tangible wearable objects could still be presented within a traditional fashion show format in the future. For now, however, the video format proves the most suitable for revealing the full scope of the project's components. In this medium, the character is given a vision, mission, circumstances, and functions, while the narrative unfolds more coherently, deeply, and dynamically. Movement becomes an indispensable tool for conveying the message, as the object itself is kinetic.

Methodology

This research is based on experimental practice involving movement tests with various materials. Exploring the plasticity of substances, carbon fiber, feathers, and organza were chosen to realize the object. Often, the experiment itself becomes a performance—an improvised interaction between body and object, in which I participate directly. This process creates unique, ephemeral moments, making documentation essential to capture both the artistic action and its conceptual depth.

The creation of prototypes and functional testing also play a significant role in the process. Written reflections—experiences, thoughts, and symbolic interpretations—are recorded in diary format. Visual documentation is equally vital: experiments are filmed and later analyzed using frames and photographs. This documentation contributes to shaping both the artistic object and the conceptual development of the project.

In essence, no idea is ever “thrown away.” Each concept born from practical experimentation is valuable as an essence worth preserving for future exploration. This method creates a causal chain for the project’s narrative development, allowing ideas to emerge naturally and unexpectedly.

Interdisciplinarity

In performative arts such as theater, dance, or performance, the performer is a central element. However, objects—costumes, props, and other stage items—also shape context, circumstances, and identity, creating a unique dialogue between human and material. When developing a character, it is important to maintain balance: both the performer and the created object complement, extend, and amplify one another. Conditions are created in which equal attention can be given to both, allowing them to support, extend, justify, protect, elevate, and enhance each other continuously.

A kinetic object interacting with the human body introduces randomness and unpredictability into the process, which constitutes a key strength of this research. This multidimensional, interdisciplinary approach not only allows for a deeper investigation of the interaction between movement and material, but also opens new possibilities for the development of artistic narrative, in which the process itself becomes the artwork.

Character: Synergy between Person and Object

The focus of this research is the construction of a character. The term “character” originates from the French *personnage* (literally, “person”) and refers to a figure in literature, theater, or film—often human, but sometimes an animal, object, fantastical being, or hero.⁶ Objects and their bearers merge into a unified entity, transcending physical boundaries to dynamically convey narratives. Movement becomes a vital instrument for communication, as the essence of these objects lies in their kinetic nature. The term “character” effectively illustrates how a created object does not cease to function once manufactured but continues to operate during post-production and through its encounter with the viewer.

Although the creative outcome presents this figure as a poetic entity, the research layers reveal the complexity of its emergence. A character can be understood broadly—from an individual performer to the embodiment of an abstract idea. The concept also signals that the created artwork can not only invite dialogue and interpretation but also narrate a story in real time. Fundamentally, a character represents something that comes alive through human presence or action, making it an ideal term to describe a work that exists through being worn.

In this context, a question arises: how does the interaction between subject and object shape the vitality of the work? Can an artwork be perceived as more alive or more material? This dilemma prompts reflection along a spectrum, where one end emphasizes the significance of the object and the other highlights the human body and its movement. The “alive” character, in this sense, reveals the dynamics of motion and the human role, while the “material” character underscores the object’s importance and visual presence. There is no single answer—these elements continuously interact, creating a subtle balance. Each artwork may naturally lean toward one side or the other, yet it is crucial to recognize how this inclination shapes the conceptual field of the work and its impact on the viewer.

Objects

The idea emerged from the need to create a kinetic head-worn structure. Carbon fiber—a very lightweight, durable, and flexible material—was chosen for this purpose. The process begins with a simple base: a carbon fiber plate is shaped into a circle that fits onto the performer's head like a crown, encircling it securely. Horizontal rods are then attached at the forehead and nape, extending symmetrically about one meter to each side. At their ends, the rods are connected to each other while also supporting a small metal washer. Viewed from below, the base resembles the contours of an eye.

The object is tested through a movement experiment involving improvisation. When worn and manipulated, the flapping edges evoke the impression of bird wings in flight. The symmetrically suspended weights at the ends of the structure are essential for producing kinetic movement. Without the weights, resistance is minimal, force is low, and movement is limited. Excessive weight, on the other hand, distorts the object's appearance in a static position, preventing it from returning to its original form during motion. Thus, weight functions as one of the most crucial factors in creating kinetic objects.

Process

During the filming of the art film, a dancer was invited to embody the character of the ancient astronaut. The flexible carbon fiber object, designed to be worn on the head, was used in various ways in the film—held in the hands, worn around the neck, or attached to the legs or arms. Movement was explored through improvisation, allowing the performer to discover harmony with the object while dancing to the music. My instructions were to act boldly and assertively, not to hesitate to grasp or bend the object, reassuring the performer of its durability. The session concluded after about an hour, when, gaining momentum, the performer jumped onto the curved object, producing a brief but audible snap. This incident revealed the limits of possibility, prompting closer examination of the carbon fiber's durability. While the film crew worried about potential breakage, I reassured them that damaged parts could be replaced. Such unexpected turns became an interesting aspect of the artistic research. We joked that in the struggle for synergy between object and subject, the human won—but then I noticed a narrow, fairly long scratch on the performer's cheek. Once the body warmed up and adrenaline flowed, the mark was barely felt, yet it served as a reminder of the body's vulnerability.

The final outcome of this experiment reveals another perspective on the subject-object duet. The object is uncomfortable, alien, and closely adheres to the body. The crucial difference, however, is that it moves with the human, not merely on the human. This interdependence must be emphasized: the human is not simply a demonstrator but an integral part of the work. The wearer's body interacts differently with various materials. Some envelop and adapt to the body, while others only touch it superficially, causing different parts of the body to twist, bend, curl, rub, or press. A wide variety of objects are attached to the body using fashion accessories. Constructions are created on gloves, hats, helmets, belts, vests, jumpsuits, shoes, backpacks, and more. In this way, conventional norms of garment creation are transcended, yet foundational knowledge of construction and modeling remains embedded in the process and proves highly valuable.

Impact on the Viewer

The project's post-production and the artwork's encounter with the viewer represent yet another component of the process. American artist and kinetic sculptor Jaroslav Belik, in his article *Creating Through the Machine: Kinetic Art*, develops an idea that resonates strongly with my own artistic understanding and intentions. Belik's goal is to create a moving machine in which movement itself plays the central role, while the function of the work as an object is minimized.⁷ In other words, the creation of unique motion becomes more important than the object itself. A static work, therefore, becomes something entirely different.

Belik distinguishes between two types of movement in his works: dislocative and aesthetic. Dislocative movement arises from the mechanism, while aesthetic motion emerges from the object or sculpture itself. Similarly, in my kinetic objects, the mechanism generates its own range of motion, which in turn produces additional aesthetic movement visible to the viewer. Belik argues that his works affect viewers in two stages: first emotionally, then intellectually, as they attempt to understand the origins of the movement. Subconsciously, viewers perceive the work as multilayered, engaging with its causality and observing how the visible object functions. The goal is to leave ample room for interpretation, as the further development of the narrative occurs in the viewer's mind and is no longer determined by the artist. In this way, the creative process continues to morph; it does not cease simply because the work is no longer materially present.

7 Jaroslav Belik, "Creation through a Machine: Kinetic Art," *Leonardo* 21, no. 3 (1988): 243–46.

Morphing, therefore, is a process of constant transformation that acts as a bridge between art, fashion, and other disciplines. Developing this idea across both creative and philosophical layers of the project gives rise to the phenomenon of morphivity. This neologism, discovered through my artistic practice, allows for clearer communication of states, emotions, and processual qualities when the final outcome of the project is deliberately left undefined. Such indeterminacy offers freedom to the artist, enabling detachment from oneself, environmental informational noise, time constraints, and expectations. I believe that a process-oriented practice is an excellent method for a disciplined, analytical, and interdisciplinary artist who seeks to preserve creative stimulation, the element of surprise, and the potential for new discoveries. Creative experiments grounded in the interaction of movement and material allow not only the generation of new forms but also the development of the very concept of creation, where the process itself—rather than the final object—takes precedence. Interdisciplinarity, the notion of the character, and viewer engagement demonstrate that artistic research remains alive both in the work and in its interpretation. In this way, morphivity becomes not only a methodology but also a creative stance, encouraging a reconsideration of the relationship between human, object, and movement.

Bio

Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė is a fashion designer, researcher, and a PhD candidate in Design at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. Her artistic research explores a morphing method for creating transformative wearable objects, where performative characters emerge through the synergy of body, movement, and material within an interdisciplinary practice merging fashion design, performance, film, and dance.



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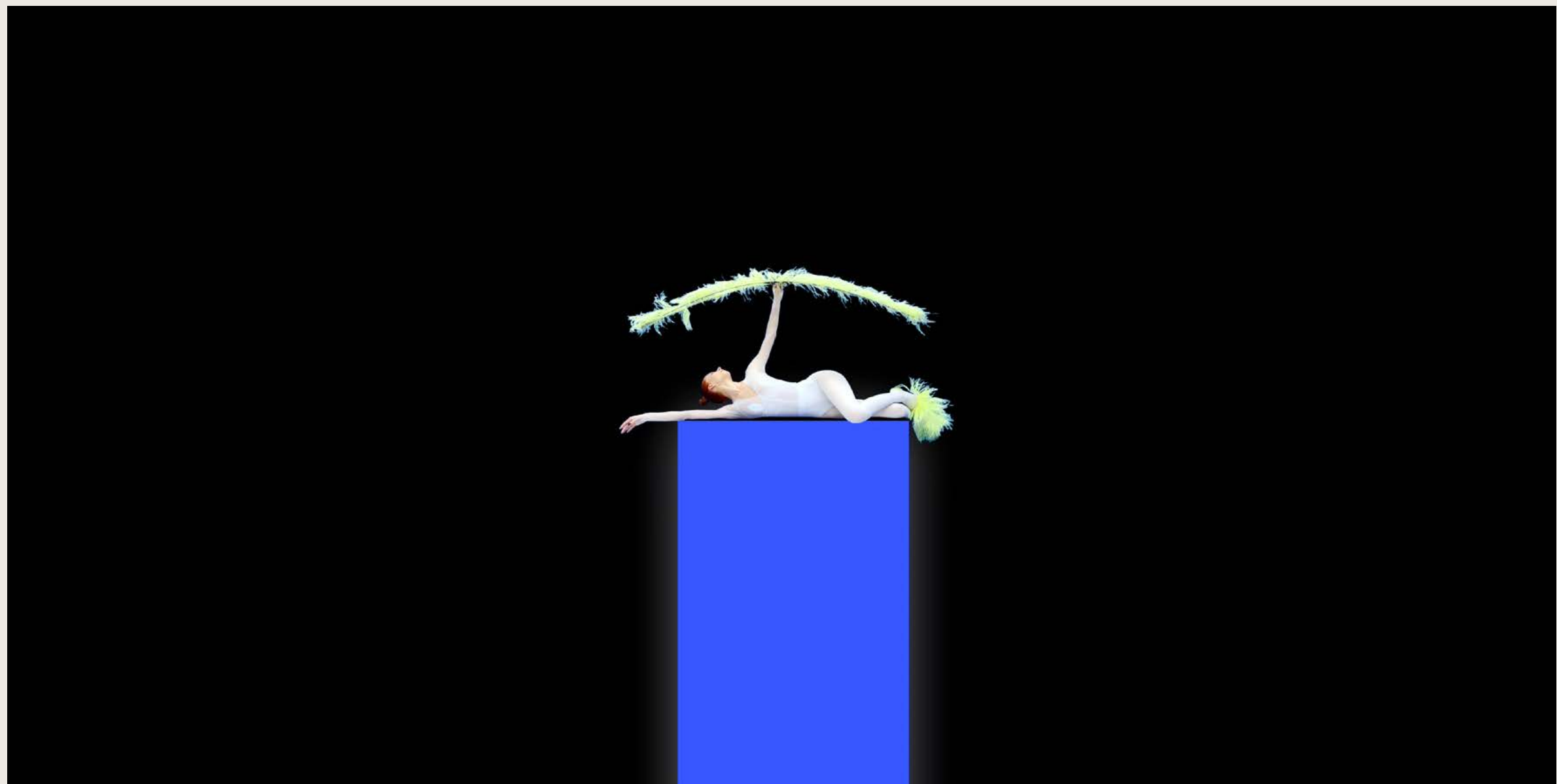
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1. *Prologue: The Silent Architects*, project author Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė, photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė.









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The Light:

Storytelling
Design &
Symbolism



Abstract

The Light explores storytelling through spiritually inspired design. The garment's silhouette, layering, colour transitions, silk fabrics, and textile heritage details reflect personal perspectives on life, bridging the transcendental and the intimate. Clothing becomes a metaphor for life's wholeness, flowing through generations and preserving memory. Napkins with handmade works from past generations convey inherited knowledge and skill.

The air lace outer layer, resembling a cocoon, symbolizes protection of the inner world. Like silkworms, we shape reality by revealing our inner selves and defining boundaries between the visible and invisible. These layers build trust, unity, and faith in something greater. Natural cocoon tones evoke the passage of time and the relativity of experience. Air lace also represents human bonds, ancestral ties, and the preservation of textile heritage through the need to create and belong.

When light passes through embroidered silhouettes of ancestors' faces, shadows emerge—visible only when illuminated. These ephemeral projections evoke the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. Like a silk thread, the essence of life continues—delicate, luminous, and present even in absence.

Keywords: storytelling design, symbolism, cultural heritage, air lace, silk.

Introduction

The invitation to participate in the exhibition opened a space for reflection on the intersection of several areas close to me: textile heritage, personal memory, ancestral symbolism, the Aracne project aimed at revitalizing the silk industry, and contemplation on life and transience, captured through light.

The aim of this research is to explore how textile design can express impermanence, memory, and spiritual presence, with light serving as both a symbolic and design element. The project is rooted in personal and collective experience and is situated within the broader context of contemporary fashion design, which increasingly transcends mere aesthetics to embrace the principles of storytelling design. This approach allows garments to become carriers of meaning, narrative, and identity, opening a space for reflection on cultural continuity, spirituality, and sustainability.

The research intertwines tradition and modernity, the material and immaterial, the personal and the universal. Through the creation of a garment as an artistic object, I explore how textile techniques, materials, and light can become tools for expressing inner states, memories, and ancestral connections. *The Light* is not only the result of a design process but also a personal narrative that—through form, texture, and light effects—touches on fundamental questions of life, transience, and spiritual presence.

Theoretical Framework

How can textile design express impermanence, memory, and spiritual presence through the use of light and symbolism?

In contemporary design, the concept of *storytelling design* has become increasingly prominent. It goes beyond the purely aesthetic function of an object, positioning it as a carrier of narrative, memory, and identity. Grimaldi and Fokkinga emphasize that the key question is not whether something is narrative, but which narrative elements are present and how they can be added or removed to make the design more meaningful, emotionally rich, and memorable.¹ Their typology of narrative in design enables the analysis of narrative structures within products, processes, and user experiences.

Research shows that storytelling design is emerging within textile and fashion design as a method that facilitates personal expression, cultural identification, and emotional depth. In Slovenian professional publications, storytelling design is recognized as an approach that allows garments to serve as bearers of meaning, memory, and symbolism, which is particularly relevant in the context of cultural heritage and sustainable design.²

¹ Stefano Grimaldi and Sander Fokkinga, "Narratives in Design: A Study of the Types, Applications and Functions of Narratives in Design Practice," *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces (DPPI 2013)*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk>.

² Sonja Šterman, "Inovativno oblikovanje korporativnih oblačil v turizmu," *Academica Turistica – Tourism and Innovation Journal* 11, no. 1 (2018): 57–65; Sonja Šterman, "Storytelling design v sodobnem tekstilnem oblikovanju," *Tekstil*, no. 3–4 (2023): 22–27.

In textile design, narrative is often expressed through materials, techniques, and symbolic motifs that convey cultural and personal heritage. Zhu and Yue analyze the symbolic meanings of geometric shapes in clothing, where the square and circle represent stability, cyclicity, and connection.³ Chen and Sharudin explore the integration of traditional symbols into contemporary product design, directly relating to the use of ancestral motifs in this project.⁴ These symbols not only preserve cultural identity but also create a bridge between past and present.

Light also plays a significant role as a design element. In this project, it serves not only as an aesthetic feature but also as a symbol of transition, presence, and impermanence. Jansen and Ledendal explore the use of sunlight as an aesthetic trigger in urban textiles, where light interacts with materials such as thermochromic fabrics.⁵ A master's thesis from Aalto University explores the interplay of light and shadow in textile design, using photography and weaving to create emotionally resonant textile collections.⁶ In my work, light passing through lace motifs of ancestral faces creates shadows—subtle imprints of presence that transform into memory through impermanence.

In contemporary fashion practice, designers also use light and shadow as tools to express emotional states and memory. Violet Zhou, in her collection *Within*, uses translucent materials to create interactive sculptures that physically and symbolically enclose the body, revealing inner worlds.⁷ Photographer Osman Ösel and stylist Peninah Amanda, in their fashion story *Shadow Play*, use light and shadow to emphasize the body and texture, creating a visual narrative of presence and transience.⁸

3 A. Zhu and H. Yue, "The Symbolic Characteristics of Square and Circle in Fashion Design," *International Journal of Fashion Design*, 2018, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.researchgate.net>.

4 Y. Chen and S. Sharudin, "The Integration of Traditional Symbols and Modern Product Design," *Journal of Design and Culture*, 2024, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org>.

5 B. Jansen and M. Ledendal, "Light and Shadow Play," *Swedish School of Textiles*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.diva-portal.org>.

6 Aalto University, *Captured in Cloth*, Master's Thesis, Aalto University, 2025, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi>.

7 Violet Zhou, *Within*, RISD, featured in *Dezeen*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.dezeen.com>.

8 Osman Ösel and Peninah Amanda, "Shadow Play," *Vogue Philippines*, 2024, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://vogue.ph>.

From Textile Heritage to Storytelling Design

The textile heritage of embroidery, knitting, crocheting, and bobbin lace is deeply rooted in Slovenia. For this reason, I explored the field of traditional handcrafts and their diverse techniques. While the core methods remain unchanged, the motifs have evolved over generations, and certain techniques are now interwoven into contemporary patterns.

I examined family-preserved textiles and locally made items, and visited the legendary flea market in Ljubljana. This market, held every Sunday, is a vibrant space filled with nostalgic memories and opportunities to discover treasures brought from dusty attics and garages—objects awaiting a new life in a new home. Its sustainable focus preserves these items, giving them renewed value and connecting generations.

Out of respect for tradition, I incorporated several embroidered napkins into the design. These represent my strong foundations and the continuity between past, present, and future. In contrast to the precise, symmetrical motifs of the napkins—symbolizing the structured richness of cultural heritage—I created an irregular, transparent cloak using the air lace technique.

My sense of cultural heritage and connection to my ancestors has accompanied me throughout life. As a child, I collected various handmade items and mended garments that once belonged to my grandparents. This early practice introduced me to the world of textile and clothing preservation. Through this work, I pay tribute to the skilled creators of the past and express my respect for their craftsmanship, their way of life, and the legacy they passed on to me.

The preserved garments and the invisible threads interwoven with my ancestors have now found a new opportunity for transformation through design—connecting emotions and thoughts through the language of clothing. This led to the central research question: how can feelings and memories be transferred onto the two-dimensional surface of textiles and then translated into three-dimensional form?

As a participant in the Aracne project, which advocates for the preservation and revitalization of silk production, I was guided to use silk in my creation. The initial idea of a protective outer layer—a cocoon-like form—symbolizes fragility and refinement, with silk representing the thread of life and the cocoon serving as a metaphor for external protection.

The creative process unfolded through the exploration of handcrafts and available silk materials, complemented by a layer of cashmere. A deepened understanding of existence and the transience of life became the inspiration for a design that transcends the material. Through design principles, I sought to achieve a balance between the inner and the outer, impermanence and strength. The use of natural colours, clean lines, and layered, symmetrical silhouettes create a stable, minimalist form. A lace detail placed between the second and third chakras—the centre of life energy—represents the intertwining of softness and inner strength, of physical and spiritual creative energy. The outer lace forms embody abstracted ancestral faces that have accompanied me through significant moments in life.

The delicate texture of the outer form, cloaked in fragility and impermanence, continuously traces new paths through the natural drape of the material. The surface pattern of the cape incorporates ancestral facial motifs, further developed using the air lace technique—stitched on a traditional sewing machine, where the handmade irregularity evokes a sense of vitality and human imperfection.

A light source projecting shadows onto a surface introduces spirituality and contrast in form. Light moves across alternating matte and glossy silk surfaces, casting the motifs' shadows onto the background. What is physically present on the garment acquires new meaning through this interplay of light and shadow—a symbolic reflection of presence and the transience of life.

Research Question

During the design process, I posed the following research question: How can textile design express impermanence, memory, and spiritual presence through the use of light and symbolism?

I focused on exploring how to depict the transition of light—from the light we carry within ourselves to the light we leave behind. The light that illuminates the path we have walked becomes a symbol of the transmission of experience, knowledge, and love to future generations. On one hand, it reflects our physical form as memory; on the other, it represents the energy of good deeds that continue to illuminate the world.

Throughout the creative process, I developed the idea that light projected through the lace motifs of the cloak creates shadows—subtle imprints of presence that, through impermanence, transform into memory. Just as light is inseparably linked to shadow, so too is the presence of someone deeply intertwined with the memory of them. This symbolic interplay of light and shadow opens a space for reflection on how physical absence does not necessarily mean loss, but rather a transformation into a lasting presence within us.

Description of the Creative Process and Reflections

The creative process unfolded as an intuitive exploration of materials, techniques, and symbols carrying personal and collective meaning. Drawing from my textile heritage—ancestral handcrafts, silk as a symbol of refinement, and lace as a bearer of memory—each element was carefully selected: silk as the thread of life, cashmere as a protective layer, and air lace as the space between the visible and the invisible. The design process became a meditative act of balancing inner emotion with outer form.

Following the initial sketches, I explored various silhouettes, layering different types of silk fabrics and experimenting with the integration of napkins. The creation of the cape—imbued with symbolic meaning— required in-depth research into fabrication techniques. I drew portraits of ancestors and embroidered them with silk thread onto water-soluble non-woven fabric. Certain facial features were filled with pieces of silk fabric also used in other parts of the garment. The base structure of the lace cape was constructed separately, then combined and sewn together with the embroidered layer to form a unified textile surface. The final step involved dissolving the water-soluble fabric in water, transforming the once rigid surface into a delicate lace-like structure.

Through layering, silhouette construction, and the integration of light, I aimed to create a garment that transcends mere function and becomes a vessel of narrative. Light passing through the lace motifs of ancestral faces casts shadows—ephemeral traces of presence that, through transience, transform into memory. This interplay of light and shadow invites reflection on how physical absence can evolve into a lasting presence within us.

The garment thus symbolizes the life cycle, transition, connection, and spiritual heritage. It weaves together personal history, cultural legacy, and the universal symbolism of light as a source of life. The process revealed deeper layers of meaning embedded in my everyday life—values and memories I had long carried but had not yet consciously expressed through design.



Ultimately, *The Light* situates itself within the broader context of contemporary design, where materiality meets immateriality, form meets meaning, and clothing becomes narrative. Light, textile heritage, and personal memory converge into a unified story—one that transcends the object and enters a space of spiritual reflection and cultural continuity (Figure 4).

The Light was exhibited in Poland at the exhibition *Costumes & Contemplation: On Religion*, held at the Central Textile Museum in Łódź. The exhibition opened on March 14, 2024, and ran from March 12 to April 14, 2024.

The Light was also exhibited in Lithuania at the exhibition *Costumes & Contemplation on Religion*, held at *Titanikas* in the Vilnius. The exhibition opened on January 7, 2024, and ran until February 8, 2024 (Figure 6).

Conclusion

The Light is a design project that transcends the boundaries of fashion, entering the realms of storytelling, memory, and spiritual reflection. Through the integration of textile heritage, symbolic materials, and the transformative power of light, the garment becomes more than a wearable object—it becomes a vessel of narrative.

The project demonstrates how traditional techniques and inherited materials can be reinterpreted in a contemporary context to express deeply personal and universal themes. The use of light and shadow as symbolic tools enables the visualization of presence and absence, memory and transformation. By projecting ancestral motifs through lace, the design captures the ephemeral nature of life and the enduring impact of those who came before us.

This work affirms the potential of textile design as a medium for emotional and cultural expression. It highlights the importance of preserving and reimagining heritage through design while inviting viewers to engage with the intangible—memory, spirit, and the passage of time. *The Light* thus contributes to the discourse on storytelling design, offering a poetic and reflective approach to fashion as a form of living memory and cultural continuity.

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Summary

The Light is a fashion design project that explores the intersection of textile heritage, spiritual symbolism, and the impermanence of life. The work transforms a garment into a medium of storytelling, connecting personal memory with collective cultural identity.

The project began with research into Slovenian textile traditions such as embroidery, lace-making, and crochet, which have been transmitted across generations. By collecting and analyzing family heirlooms and local handmade textiles—many discovered at the Ljubljana flea market—the designer explored how traditional techniques and motifs evolve over time. These elements were reinterpreted in a contemporary context, emphasizing sustainability, memory preservation, and intergenerational continuity.

The final garment features a layered silhouette made from silk, cashmere, and air lace. Inspired by the cocoon, the form symbolizes protection and transformation. The use of natural materials and neutral tones reflects the fragility and transience of life, while the layering and symmetrical composition create a sense of balance between the inner and the outer, the ephemeral and the enduring.

A key conceptual element is the interplay of light and shadow. When light passes through lace motifs depicting ancestral faces, shadows are projected onto surrounding surfaces. These fleeting silhouettes evoke the presence of ancestors, transforming physical absence into spiritual memory. The garment thus becomes a living archive—an object that not only adorns the body but also tells a story of lineage, love, and legacy.

The theoretical framework draws on narrative design principles and symbolism in fashion, emphasizing how garments can carry meaning beyond their material form. The project further explores how light functions as a design element capable of evoking emotional depth and spiritual reflection, reinforcing the connection between the visible and the invisible.

Through this process, *The Light* becomes more than a piece of clothing, turning into an expression of life's cycles, a tribute to heritage, and a meditation on presence and absence. The design invites viewers to reflect on the light we carry within and the light we leave behind, offering a contemplative space where fashion becomes a vessel for memory, identity, and transformation.

Bio

Sonja Šterman holds a PhD in and is an associate professor at the Department of Textile Materials and Design, University of Maribor, Slovenia, where she teaches fashion, textile, and accessories design. She has over twenty years of experience in the fashion industry, having worked with international brands and specialized in uniform design projects in Slovenia. Her recent work focuses on the Aracne Project, preserving Europe's silk heritage and exploring storytelling through design.



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1, 2 Final model details with light filtering through the lace, casting facial shadows on the wall via the air-lace mesh façade, photography by Sonja Šterman.

3, 5 *The Light*, fragments, project author Sonja Šterman, photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė.

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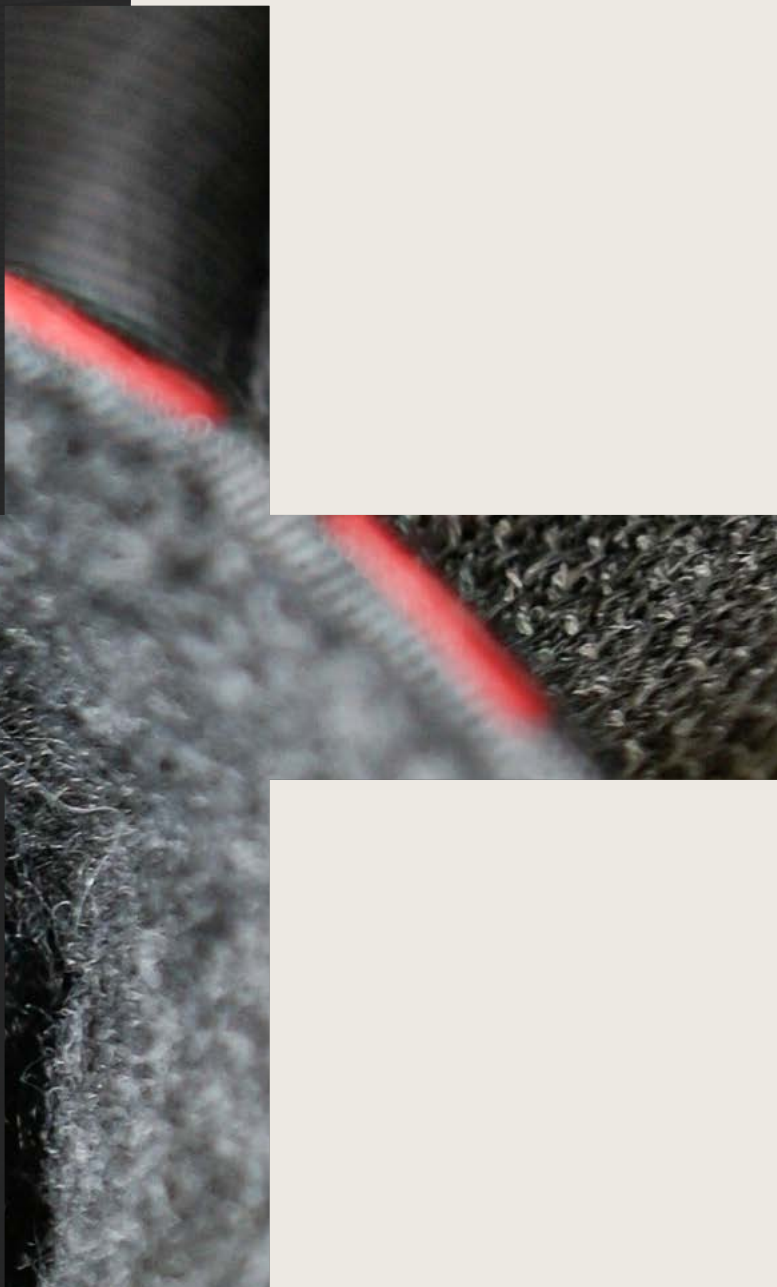
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The Key to Creative Identity:

From Heart
to Heart



Abstract

This article explores my creative identity as it unfolds through a continuous dialogue between ethnic culture, historical memory, and contemporary fashion. My artistic practice is grounded in deep respect for national heritage, the system of symbols, and the expression of femininity conveyed through recognizable visual motifs—the heart, crown, cross, and wing. I analyze the key concepts of my creative collections that reflect both personal and collective experience: *Market Festival*, *The Old Roofs of Vilnius*, *I Remember...*, *A Woman's Heart*, *Act. In Search of Historical Memory*, *51rd15/Heart*, and *Et Nunc et Semper*. In these collections, the interplay of tradition and modernity becomes not only an aesthetic choice but also a meaningful bridge between past and present, the female life cycle and the history of the nation. Creative expression is approached as an inner prayer, a meditation, and a way of preserving cultural identity—from heart to heart.

Keywords: creative identity, ethnoculture, historical memory, modern fashion, symbols (heart, crown, cross, wings), tradition and modernity, femininity, cultural heritage, rural identity.

Creative identity is the sum of inner experiences, values, and aesthetic choices—a fabric of memories and dreams that shapes the artist's unique signature and allows her to be recognized among many others. It reflects not only personal history but also builds bridges between past and present, between tradition and innovation, and between individual stories and broader cultural contexts. By maintaining a distinctive creative language, the artist not only creates but also tells stories—about herself, about time, and about the world as seen through her eyes.

My creative practice grows out of a deep connection to cultural heritage, historical memory, and personal emotional experience. For me, ethnoculture is not merely a decorative motif—it is a living spiritual material from which I weave my narratives. Through the medium of contemporary fashion, I aim to convey not only beauty but also meaning: emotional depth, symbolic language, and the intersections of different eras.

My works are perhaps most easily recognized through a consistent visual system of creative symbols: the heart, the crown, the cross, the dove's wing, and the pearl. These signature motifs, developed across different collections and projects, connect past and present, tradition and modernity, emotional nostalgia and design rationality, femininity and strength, gentleness and courage.

Yet, for me, what matters is not only the external, decorative form but also the inner story of the garment—from its structure and function, to the texture of the fabric and the hidden, encoded memories it carries; from emotion to belief. For me, creation is an inner prayer, a meditation, an exchange of energies. I design so that each garment or accessory becomes more than a stylistic detail—it becomes a bridge between two hearts: from myself, the creator, to the woman who will wear the garment and live her life within it.

To make this story clear and cohesive, I will begin with *Adam and Eve*—the first steps of my independent creative journey. One of my earliest collections, *Market Festival*, marked by winning the first prize at the Vilnius Fashion Days in 1991, was also my diploma work. In it, modern and ethnic fashion intertwined, forming a bridge between past and present. It was a striking, conceptual, even revolutionary collection: for the first time on a Lithuanian runway, men appeared in skirts, challenging gendered clothing stereotypes and provoking a discourse in fashion at the dawn of independence. This early work revealed the intuitive foresight of a young designer, combining well-known motifs of national heritage with creative freedom—and thus beginning an artistic path that would recur throughout my later projects.

The concept behind this collection extended beyond fashion—it was an expression of national identity in a liberating Lithuania. Today, nationalism continues to inspire contemporary designers: ethnic ornaments, folk art colors, and traditional textures are returning to city streets, integrating into contemporary wear, sustainable fashion, and conceptual design. Modern fashion increasingly looks to its roots: ethnic details—linen fabrics, geometric ornaments, silhouettes of national costumes, color combinations, and even phrases or dialects—are now reinterpreted in contemporary forms, from city clothing and accessories to street style. By combining the old with the new, we create a living dialogue between ancestral traditions and the rhythm of the contemporary world—a continuous, vibrant thread linking the past with the present, where heritage carries a message for the future.

In the *Market Festival* collection, the natural colors of rural cottages, silhouettes reminiscent of modest furniture, and traditional Lithuanian embroidery—reflecting the floral ornaments of furniture decoration—are reimagined as contemporary fashionable garments. This synthesis of national heritage and modern aesthetics not only creates visual appeal but also embodies the continuity of national identity—the garments become timeless symbols. Hand-cut felt hats visually anticipate modern laser technologies, foreshadowing today's fusion of fashion and technology. Ethnographic details, colors, and fragments of national costumes are thus transformed from objects of nostalgia into tools of contemporary artistic expression in fashion.

The concept behind this collection remains relevant today, as fashion increasingly speaks about identity, uniqueness, distinctiveness, gender fluidity, and the dialogue between local and global contexts. My creative identity is grounded in the ability to reinterpret tradition through a contemporary lens, transforming it not into a museum relic but into a living, inspiring design narrative rooted deeply in ethnocultural heritage, where history, technology, bold experimental approaches, and personal emotional connection converge.

A logical continuity of this search for creative identity emerges in the special collection *Old Roofs of Vilnius* (2006). This collection pays tribute to my native city and to the cradle of my professional activity—the Vilnius Model House, located in the very heart of the city, next to the Town Hall, which at that time was celebrating its 55th anniversary. The collection is not only an homage to tradition but also a creative reflection on the city as a source of inspiration. From nostalgic memories to contemporary forms, the beauty of the city permeates the designs, embedding personal and cultural memory into modern garment silhouettes.

Native Vilnius is like an old letter, read hundreds of times, yet each reading stirs the heart anew. It is a nostalgic view from above—from the fifth floor of the Model House, as if seen from a bird in flight—onto the old city, its face lined with wrinkles of time. Recognizable, familiar, and inseparable from my everyday experiences, the city becomes a personal field of memory, merging with architectural thinking, where each line feels like a walk along the arteries of the Old Town, an emotional journey through time and sensation.

The structural modeling of the collection's silhouettes and their clear forms echo the urban logic of Vilnius' Old Town—intersections become cross-sections, the lines of tiled roofs and façades transform into relief-like constructions, narrow streets are redrawn as precise seams, pavements of gray stones gain the texture of coarse wool, and the play of small windows is reflected in fabric patterns. Each piece evokes a place we carry constantly in our hearts—unchanging in the flow of time, yet always familiar, intimate, beloved, and deeply felt.

"Thoughts soaring over the rooftops of my beloved city, seeing it from a bird's-eye view..."—this could be the inner monologue of this collection. Here, every silhouette transforms into the architecture of memory, while each garment becomes a wearable miniature of the city. Decorative details act as urban markers: crosswalk lines, the subtle rhythms of old windows rendered as graphic lines and appliqués, flashes of reddish roof tiles, and the ornate domes of churches emerging on embroidered surfaces of decorative cross-shaped buttons—spiritual city signs whispering the presence of the "here and now," while echoing the deep history of a familiar city.

The collection features the clear forms and modern silhouettes of the 2000s—like a strong architectural foundation in a narrative imbued with emotion. Sharp shoulder lines dominate, while widening skirts and dresses, draped with the chaotic rhythm of city streets, meet defined waistlines, together creating a geometric framework of memory into which flashes of historical forms are naturally integrated. Gallifet-style trousers—once military wear, worn by our grandfathers—are transformed into a modern, structural part of a women's ensemble, reflecting gender equality. The freedom of harem pants, originating from Eastern cultures, subtly merges with slow fashion and conscious comfort, becoming an unexpected yet organic element of the modern Lithuanian woman's style. These forms are not only an expression of my personal stylistic signature but also an open dialogue between genders, cultures, eras, and identities, in which I pursue not merely outward beauty or effect, but a manifestation of my inner creative freedom.

This collection reveals three pillars of creative identity: memory—as the innate starting point of creation; form—as a metaphor for the city's structure; and materiality—as a sensory connection to reality. The spiritual narrative of Vilnius' old rooftops and Baroque churches, alongside the whispered prayers of pigeons perched on wide windowsills, frame this collection as a poetic ode to a beloved city. In its streets, we took our first steps of discovery, while the rooftops became a symbol of infinity, a space where past and eternity intertwine.

"For a city is the hearts of its people, and one's hometown is the place where every heart finds its home. The city in which we grew up will always remain the home of our hearts, our safe roof above memories and dreams. One's native city is a bridge of the heart and memory, connecting our past with the present."

The creative journey continued with the collection *I Remember...*, born as a sensitive voyage through the labyrinths of memory—childhood recollections, dreams, stories, and premonitions of the future, where fragments of images preserved in the heart intertwine into a unified artistic fabric of unbleached linen. These visual fragments of folk crafts and ethnographic motifs, like memories delicately embroidered with soft threads, once again connect a contemporary fashion concept with the codes of national identity and personal past experiences. What is closest, most familiar, and seemingly self-evident often lies deep within, in the secret corners of the heart, in the folds of thought, and in the recesses of the subconscious. For a long time, I had nurtured the idea of creating a collection inspired by Lithuanian ethnic motifs—this time approached more sensitively, more quietly than my first collection of 1991.

Although the *I Remember...* collection had long been carried in my thoughts, its creation was swift, like a spontaneous, expressive sketch. Remembering the bright dreams of childhood, the warmth of heartfelt stories told by women in my family, and the historical legends I had heard, I crown the woman—the mother, the beloved, the wife, the sister, the daughter. I seek connections with the historical context of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, visualizing the passionate love of its former rulers, and lightly sketching the silhouette of Queen Barbara Radziwiłł, as if she were alive here and now—simple, cozy, and contemporary.

Creation, where the memory of the heart becomes fabric, and each garment transforms into an artistic object preserving historical memory. The economic crisis of 2008 constrained finances and material resources, making investment in creative collections seem imprudent, as if money would be thrown to the wind. Thus, the long-nurtured ideas and overflowing creative energy had to be tempered and channeled through seemingly simple, yet profoundly ethno-inspired contemporary fashion design tools: natural linen, raw unbleached cotton, tulle and lace remnants, primitive household hardware, and decorative elements repurposed in unconventional ways—elements that would otherwise remain domestic or hidden inside a garment, such as waistbands from men's trousers or lace from pillows or towels, transformed into regal headpieces.

For functional fastenings and decorative accents, everything that had long been “hidden” in rusty metal candy tins and discovered in the drawers of my grandmother's old wardrobe, was repurposed: ties, buttons of various sizes, clasps, hooks, threads for mending, and more. In my memory, the contents of these little boxes embody a spirit of thrift, scarcity, and unique ingenuity from that era—like an old rusted mirror reflecting the contemporary relevance of sustainability and ethical fashion.

The decorative elements of traditional folk crafts—weaving, knitting, embroidery, appliqué, and beadwork—that women used to fill long snowy winter evenings are also important witnesses to rural domestic life. Yet, in the context of contemporary technologies, they acquire a unique new dimension. The most fascinating part of this story is that the true origin of this collection did not begin in the countryside, nor even in Lithuania, but in Paris! Vintage crocheted silver handbags, spotted in a Saint-Honoré street boutique window, miraculously emerged from my dreams and memories. According to Professor Tadas Baginskas of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, Department of Design, they became the leitmotif and starting point of the collection—a “sketchy, one-night jewelry” line of accessories... thus giving birth to *I Remember...*

Every authentic detail of memory becomes part of the creative identity, while symbolic memory serves as a bridge between generations, eras, and worlds. In the artistic solutions of the collection's ensembles and accessories, a dialogue of silhouettes, textures, and emotions emerges: natural materials and interpretations of ancient crafts merge with contemporary silhouettes, allowing each piece to remain distinctive yet recognizable—both ethnically rooted and modern simultaneously. Heart, clock, votive, metal clasp, silver thread—these are the threads of creativity that connect this and future collections.

The 2013 collection *A Woman's Heart*, which later evolved into the project *Act. In Search of Historical Memory*, is a profoundly sensitive, beautiful, and philosophically rich narrative—a woman's journey through life illuminated by history. It serves as a true creative testimony about a woman and her relationship with time, history, and identity. This conceptual collection was born from reflections on a woman's life from birth to her final breath, considering the female life cycle as a parallel to the history of the Lithuanian state. Multiple lines of time and meaning intersect in the collection: the history of the Lithuanian nation, symbolically reflected in the High-Baroque ensemble of the Pažaislis Monastery, and the stages of a woman's life, accompanied by intense emotions.

The complex, colorful, and ever-changing phases of the monastery's existence resemble the surface of water, reflecting moments in a woman's life: birth, childhood, friendship, passion, love, motherhood, everyday routines, career, maturity, fulfillment, old age, repentance, faith, and a sense of eternity. Inspired by the history of the Pažaislis Monastery—a place where love, sacrifice, suffering, and rebirth dramatically converge—the collection becomes an artistic expression of the parallel between a woman's life and the historical evolution of her homeland. Guided by the monastery, both an architectural and spiritual monument that has survived countless historical transformations, this collection portrays the woman as a historical and cultural axis: a bearer of life, a symbol of the homeland, and a guardian of wisdom.

The monastery, having endured the passage of centuries—from the flourishing Baroque period to a wartime field hospital and salt storage, from a mysterious monastic enclave to today's open museum and a house of prayer—symbolically reflects the multilayered nature of a woman's existence. Within this history lie the “mountains of salt” of life, altars of love, and the spiritual resilience of women depicted in everyday frescoes. The collection fuses contemporary fashion with historical context, encoding the secret language of a woman's emotions. She is multifaceted, constantly shifting in form and mood: sometimes a spirit rising from the depths of the past, sometimes lost and stormy, at other times proud, brave, combative, or tender, silent, and weary from everyday life. She may appear as a spiritual nun, a passionate lover, a gentle bride, or even a saint.

This theatrical fashion collection, combining contemporary fashion concepts with reflections of historical memory expressed through the language of art, encodes the emotional secrets of a woman—the guardian of family values. The heart of a woman may embody the nun, the recluse, the warrior, the traitor, the coward, the possessed, the affectionate, the merciful, or the passionate—each brushstroke revealing the spirit of the collection.

Each model acts as a key to a woman's heart, holding her most sincere emotions, secrets, doubts, intuitions, disappointments, faith, and creativity. For example, the series titled *Everyday Life* tells a story of a gray, constrained daily routine—sometimes monotonous, intrusive, indifferent, or fragile. Yet, within this daily life, there is silence, warmth, patience, simplicity, and comfort. Daily life can feel heavy, like a cross to bear, yet its familiarity renders it manageable and even tender, recognizable and close to the heart.

The collection reflects not only the essence of femininity but also a form of creative openness, a deliberate emotional exposure. It unfolds as an intimate map of feelings, expressed through architecturally constructed designs, volumetric 3D forms, symbolic cross, heart, and wing-shaped accessories, as well as exaggerated structural headpieces. Finally, the white dove from the Pažaislis coat of arms, echoing the city's own pigeons, soars above the rooftops of Vilnius with outstretched wings, becoming a symbol of freedom and affirming both the liberty and protection inherent in my creative vision.

Creativity is perhaps the most beautiful gift and reward for those who have been, are, and will be by my side: nurturing, teaching, befriending, loving, trusting, and inspiring a sincere faith—that I am needed, that I can bring people together, and that one can feel at home. “As water reflects the face, so the heart reflects the person” (Proverbs 27:19)—this biblical passage resonates with the essence of the collection: it is a reflection of the inner world, spiritual sensitivity, and cultural experience expressed through fashion.

The project *Act. In Search of Historical Memory* (2016) marked a pivotal turning point in my creative journey and became a platform for conceptual maturity, inaugurating a new phase that encouraged the formation of my personal brand. The central idea draws on a line from Virgil's *Aeneid*, written centuries ago: "Varium et mutabile, semper Femina—Diverse and changeable, always Woman." This inspired the creation of my personal fashion brand, *51rd15 / Heart*, affirming my creative identity.

Throughout our lives runs a thread, like a red line, reminding us that true values are seen with the heart. Guided by this inner conviction, I share my creative ideas—seeking to convey warmth, connection, knowledge, and growth. I care deeply about preserving what is real, human, and close. Believing in these values, together with my collaborator Diana Ročienė, we founded the fashion salon *Semper Femina*. Jokingly, we said that for a table to stand firmly, it needs four legs.

This principle gave rise to four main areas of our activity: the *Semper Femina* boutique, the *Semper Femina* women's club, cultural and creative projects abroad, and our major new initiative—the brand *51rd15*, where fashion, life philosophy, and symbolism converge. The signature brand developed successfully until the pandemic; however, for economic reasons, part of its activity is currently suspended. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight the core expressions of my creative identity: profound respect for ethnoculture, celebration of femininity, and the language of meaningful symbols. Hidden within the combination of numbers and letters *51rd15* lies a word dear to us—heart. It is not only a symbol but also a reflection of our relationship with creativity: from heart to heart.

At this stage, my creative identity unfolds through reflection on the journey undertaken, grounded in an ongoing dialogue between historical and ethnocultural heritage and contemporary fashion. My signature style is recognizable through a recurring system of symbols, a refined and thoughtfully structured language of design constructions and forms, and an emotional tension that opens deeper layers of meaning, creating a close connection with the viewer or client.

A crucial aspect of my work is the architecturally constructed silhouette and attention to detail, reflecting a balance between fragility and sacredness. Wire 3D forms, headpieces, and handmade embellishments serve as a visual continuation of the narrative aesthetics characteristic of my work—where fashion functions as performance, a ritual, and a sign.

I continue to use three principal symbols—the heart, the crown, and the cross—as hallmarks of my creative identity.

The heart—the center of femininity, embodying love, generosity, and inner strength.

The crown—a manifestation of a woman’s dignity, value, and spiritual power.

The cross—a symbol of life’s trials, choices, and sacrifices.

The wing of the dove from the Pažaislis Monastery coat of arms introduces another dimension of creative identity: the freedom to think, create, and simply be.

The collection created for my personal brand, like my previous works, is distinguished by a highly expressive emotional language of fashion. Here, fashion is not merely clothing; it becomes an image that mirrors a woman’s inner state, her identity, history, and her era. My signature style is recognizable through a subtle interplay with an almost monochromatic color palette, precise construction, and the profound symbolic meaning embedded in accessory details. This matured concept has transcended the runway, entering everyday life and allowing a woman not only to wear the garments but to experience the emotional narrative I convey.

The garments are designed for an engaged, conscious woman who enjoys life, is unafraid to express her individuality, and values quality, sustainability, and an emotional connection with her clothing. She is warm, heartfelt, creative, romantic, active, ever-changing—always a woman.

The *51rd15* collection is characterized by subtle forms and thoughtful construction, with carefully considered silhouettes. The capsule assortment includes high-quality cotton blouses, silk dresses, velvet trousers, and cozy wool coats. Complementing these garments is a line of unique jewelry and accessories, giving the garments added meaning—each piece imbued with symbolic significance. The main decorative elements—heart, crown, cross, and wings—drawn from previous collections, serve as consistent markers of my creative signature, establishing continuity, reinforcing authorial identity, and maintaining aesthetic harmony.

The most recent work, *Et Nunc et Semper* (Now and Always), becomes a symbol of my creative mission: a votive offering, a sign of gratitude or promise, given from the heart. This creative journey, which began with a love for ethnographic culture and national heritage, now embraces spirituality, faith, and inner transformation. I explore parallels between the history of the nation and the world of women, where love, sacrifice, strength, faith, and hope converge. The roots of this creative exploration stem from my earlier artistic experiences.

While studying the founding history of the Pažaislis Monastery architectural ensemble, I encountered traces deeply embedded in both personal and national memory—indelible marks that endure and serve as an inexhaustible source of creative inspiration. The layers of historical memory are revealed not merely through factual accounts but are eloquently expressed in the architecture, the sacred environment, personal narratives, and emotional relics. The evolution of the Lithuanian state, the legend of the monastery's founding family, the life cycles of the Camaldolese monks, and their spiritual experiences intertwine in my vision, unfolding as a multi-layered texture.

In this work, as in previous collections, I explore the intersection of contemporary fashion, history, and spiritual experience. Creative expression functions as a subtle bridge—linking past and present, a woman's emotions and collective memory, personal faith and shared cultural experience, and combining forms immediately recognizable with deeper symbolic meaning. The iconic construction of a man's jacket and shirt, along with the use of traditional materials—cotton, wool, tulle, embroidery elements, metal clasps, and decorative votive motifs—becomes a metaphor for the balance of temporality, softness, strength, and fragility.

Everything is connected as if by invisible threads: architectural forms and textures of bygone eras, crumbling marble floors, faded frescoes, light filtering through church vaults, windows overlooking an old apple orchard, a courtyard well adorned with frozen metal flowers. These are not merely materials but emotional symbols, testimonies to the human spiritual journey. A clock tirelessly counts the hours, witnessing eternity; the toll of bells marks of the unbroken flow of life and creation. This is a reflection of our inner world, where faith and doubt, loss and hope, silence and longing converge.

"The Lord is my refuge, from generation to generation. Before the mountains were brought forth, from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Psalm 90:1-2).

Et nunc, et semper is not only the title of this latest work but also the core of my creative identity: the life cycle of a woman as a parallel to history, as the memory of the heart, which creates, believes, bears witness, preserves, and passes on.



Jolanta Talaikytė is a Lithuanian fashion designer and professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, with over thirty years of experience in creating original collections that blend cultural heritage, historical memory, and contemporary design. She began her career at the Vilnius Fashion House in 1985 and has since presented her work both in Lithuania and internationally, including Austria, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Slovenia, Germany, and the United States. Talaikytė has collaborated with leading Lithuanian fashion brands, designed ceremonial attire for Lithuanian Olympic teams, universities, and institutions, and created uniforms for Lithuanian airlines, energy companies, and public services. Her artistic projects, such as the *Art Closer / Avenueart* silk accessories collection and the *Gloria Lietuvai* musical project, alongside her authorial collections *A Woman's Heart* and project *Act. In Search of Historical Memory* reflect her commitment to integrating art, history, and fashion. These endeavors also led to the creation of her personal brand *51rd15 / Širdis* and the fashion salon *Semper Femina Concept*, uniting commercial, artistic, and cultural innovation.



1, 3 *From Heart to Heart*,
fragments, project
author Jolanta Talaikytė,
photography by Vaiva
Abromaitytė.

2, 4 *From Heart to Heart*,
project author Jolanta
Talaikytė, photography by
Vaiva Abromaitytė.









Justė Tarvydė



On Becoming a Fashion Artist:

The Liminal
Space between
Art and Design



Abstract

This article explores the emerging role of the fashion artist—an elusive figure positioned between fashion design and contemporary art. By detaching fashion artefacts from functionality and the body, the study investigates how garments can act as poetic, metaphorical agents in artistic contexts. Through conceptual recontextualization, fashion becomes a medium of non-verbal communication, capable of conveying layered cultural meanings. Drawing on theories from Bruno Latour and Daniel Miller, the work positions fashion objects as active agents in shaping identity and behavior. The author's art object (*H*) *anger*, exhibited in *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, exemplifies this approach by elevating a mundane item into an aesthetic inquiry. Influenced by Susan Sontag's call for sensual, surface-level engagement, the study reclaims fashion's narrative power beyond consumerism. Ultimately, the fashion artist emerges as a curator of cultural memory and critique, challenging disciplinary boundaries and reshaping our understanding of material culture.

Keywords: fashion art, object agency, artistic media, artistic research, disembodiment, ready-made.

Let's say that, in general, fashion designers shape silhouettes and fashion stylists craft visual narratives. What, then, about fashion artists? Their role lingers in a more uncertain space—somewhere between disciplines, between categories. Does such a figure exist at all, or are fashion and art forever destined to orbit in separate spheres? In my current PhD research, I find myself drawn to that "in-between." I investigate how fashion—when detached from its functionality and bodily context—can "speak" a different language. By extracting fashion artefacts from their usual surroundings and placing them within the contemplative space of art, I seek to understand their poetic potential, their capacity to carry metaphor, memory, and meaning. It is here, in this liminal space, that I look for the role of the fashion artist who uses fashion not as commodity but as an artistic concept. I am exploring the landscape of art, trying to find the place of fashion here and to investigate the role of an artist who uses fashion as an artistic medium. And, luckily, I am far from alone. Employing fashion artefacts as my main inspiration, I aim to take them away from their conventional context, disconnect them from the body, and place them on the pedestal of an art space.

In this article, I present my approach to fashion as a medium of artistic expression, exploring how ready-made objects gain new meanings and roles, and how they evoke new understandings of fashion and the collective identity of humankind as shaped by its means. My art object *(H)anger*, exhibited at *Costume & Contemplation on Religion* (2024), plays a crucial role. I will discuss how it served as the focal point for more extensive artistic research, which is currently being pursued through my doctoral studies at the Vilnius Academy of Arts.

So, “fashion artist”—what lies behind this ambitious title? Not much, indeed. Usually, fashion illustrators are labeled as such: the ones who draw beautiful, art-like sketches that translate the creative ideas of a genius designer who may lack drawing skills. They are like stylists, but on paper. In rarer cases, such as McQueen or Margiela, designers themselves are called fashion artists. And here the interesting tension arises. While some fashion designers consider themselves artists, many—including some of the most celebrated figures like Rei Kawakubo, Karl Lagerfeld, and Miuccia Prada—reject the idea that fashion qualifies as art. They argue that fashion is a creative field rooted in everyday life, belonging more to creative industry than to the realm of fine art. Recently, however, there has been a noticeable movement between fields and disciplines. Fashion exhibitions in prestigious art galleries and museums are no longer surprising, and designers’ artistic expression beyond the runway seems to be an emerging trend. Fashion has been transformed into art by figures such as Martin Margiela, Helmut Lang, and Hussein Chalayan, while Rick Owens and many young designers continue to straddle the boundary between fashion and art. In the meantime, Jonathan Anderson (former LOEWE, now DIOR creative director) has experimented with the role of art curator. The merging of fashion and art has become a powerful space for meaningful engagement. In the past, large-scale runway shows held in spectacular venues, high-profile openings, and fashion tours across global capitals were the main ways brands captured global attention. Today, this approach is evolving: brands are turning to temporary exhibitions, carefully curated installations, and exclusive events that often require reservations and create a sense of FOMO. These experiences are no longer reserved for a small circle of VIPs and celebrities but are designed to reach a broader audience—those who, after years of rising prices, have been pushed to the sidelines. In this way, fashion and art are blending to create more accessible, yet still aspirational, opportunities for engagement. In 2024, forty-eight luxury brands staged 192 exhibitions worldwide. These were not merely aesthetic displays or celebratory moments; they functioned as strategic platforms, placing brands within wider cultural conversations. By collaborating with local artists or traditional artisans, these projects built connections that felt authentic, creating recognition, a sense of belonging, and a stronger presence in key markets.¹

1 Maison Margiela, “Line 2 Intangible Products – Seoul,” *NSS Magazine*, www.nssmag.com/en/fashion/42354/maison-margiela-line-2-intangible-products-seoul.

For fashion to be legitimately regarded as art, it requires more than just self-identification by designers; it also depends on broader validation from key figures within the art world—such as gallerists, collectors, and curators—whose recognition helps define what is accepted as art. As the renowned fashion researcher, curator, and editor-in-chief of *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, Valerie Steele observes:

The exhibitions of fashion in museums have contributed to blurring the line between art and fashion, especially with regard to haute couture and avant-garde fashion. Both fashion and art are part of visual culture, and contemporary artists sometimes draw on fashion, often to make a point about consumerism or body image. However, the fashion world and art world are very different systems comprised of different institutional and individual players. To say that fashion is culturally significant is undeniably true. But does that make it art?²

This question echoes in my doctoral research where I delve into fashion as a conceptual form of art, or even as an artistic medium in its own right.

When analyzing the field of art, several approaches to the relationship with fashion artefacts and their transformation into art objects begin to crystallize. The most direct path follows the creative principle of the ready-made, which involves transferring an industrial product into the white-cube space and imbuing it with a newly formed meaning. A similar technique is assemblage (from French *assemblage*—a collection), in which the artwork is constructed from individual, interrelated objects or fragments that together create a distinct narrative. Another creative approach is linked to deconstruction and manipulation, when an authentic fashion item is dismantled or transformed into another form while retaining some connection to its “garment-like” nature. Alongside this is the artistic expression of textile or soft sculpture. In this case, clothing is pressed, draped, and used as material to create abstract compositions of color and texture. Garments and accessories soaked in plaster or cement become monumental objects. Thus, the approach to fashion elements as creative material is principled and methodical. The wardrobe arsenal becomes a resource from which new conceptual constructs are formed.

The placement of fashion elements within varying, unfamiliar contexts results in the acquisition of shifting meanings, which can be conceptually employed within the environment of artistic practice. In this process, fashion elements function as mediators, serving as tools of non-verbal communication that generate layered and evocative metaphors for both creator and viewer. A particularly compelling aspect of this phenomenon is how such symbolism operates once these elements are detached from the body and conventional frameworks. The viewer's gaze, encountering a familiar object now displaced from its functional and corporeal associations, is prompted to reinterpret its significance. This act of re-contextualization invites a reading situated within the realm of contemporary art, where garments and fashion-related artefacts, curated and reframed by the fashion artist, become vehicles of conceptual expression and active agents within the visual narrative. From a sociological perspective, and speaking in Bruno Latour's terms, fashion objects are active actors.³ This approach treats clothes not as passive products but as agents playing an important role in shaping design, consumer behavior, and production practices.

It is often said that "theater begins with the dressing room." In a similar vein, I would propose that fashion begins with the hanger as in my experience it marked the starting point of a tangible synthesis between fashion and art. In 2024, upon receiving an invitation to participate in the international exhibition *Costume & Contemplation on Religion*, I spent considerable time reflecting on the nature of the work I could contribute to such a thematically rich and conceptually demanding context. An ordinary, utilitarian element of fashion—the humble hanger—unexpectedly took a central role in my practice, revealing a previously overlooked potential for artistic expression. I was deeply drawn to the object's laconic form and inherent "modesty," qualities that resonated with my own aesthetic sensibilities and became a catalyst for further artistic inquiry. This encounter reawakened the artist within me—an identity that had remained latent for decades. While I still hesitate to fully claim that title, "fashion artist" seems a safer term in this case.

3 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

In the context of my ongoing research, I further examine the historical and ideological intersections of fashion and religion, particularly in how both disciplines have exerted control over the female body—its visibility, movement, and moral coding. Both systems have long dictated standards of beauty, virtue, and modesty, shaping bodies not only through material structures but also through symbolic frameworks. This dynamic is articulated through my engagement with an unassuming yet symbolically rich object: the clothing hanger. Despite its unchanging utilitarian form, the hanger has accrued multiple layers of cultural and ethical significance. Historically a tool of order and display, it has evolved into a silent actor within broader narratives. In the 1960s and 1970s, the hanger became a politically charged symbol—employed in opposing ways by both pro-life and pro-choice movements to evoke issues of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Later, it took on an aesthetic critique when ultra-thin runway models were disparagingly labeled “walking hangers,” triggering discourse on body image, eating disorders, and the exclusionary ideals perpetuated by the fashion industry. In my installation work, hangers are not merely referenced but reimagined—intertwined to form a net-like structure, suspended to resemble a puppeteer’s apparatus. This visual language evokes both entrapment and choreography, mirroring the invisible mechanisms of control exerted by fashion, akin to the moral guidance of religious doctrine. Here, fashion is not merely a system of garments but a contemporary ritualized practice, one that sanctifies certain bodies while marginalizing others. The installation invites contemplation on the aesthetic-spiritual binary, positioning fashion as a secular yet pervasive belief system—a new religion of image, desire, and discipline.

In the search for the conceptual meaning of fashion artefacts, the anthropological perspective is also relevant. As anthropologist Daniel Miller notes, objects have a dual impact: they can both constrain and enable people’s actions, and their “invisibility”⁴ has a powerful effect. The less we are aware of them, the stronger their impact. Objects form part of a specific “scene” that establishes norms and ensures normative behavior, which is especially significant in the context of material culture. A large part of our identity is formed by our external environment, not only by conscious reflection or bodily experience. The material objects that constitute our external environment shape our habits and subtly encourage certain actions and behavioral patterns. In this way, material culture becomes inseparable from our social reality, as it reveals how external factors structure and sustain our everyday lives.

In considering the use of fashion artefacts in artistic practice, I am guided by Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*.⁵ Sontag says that many people still view art primarily as having content and attributes this approach to the influence of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. According to Sontag, these theorists treated all phenomena as superficial, requiring analysis to uncover hidden meaning. She argues that art has the ability to reveal the true meaning of a thing and that fashion functions as a form of "nonverbal communication," in which stereotypes shape interpretation. This interpretation can shift depending on context and experience. We exist through our appearance and in this case, fashion acts as our mask. In my artistic practice, I use fashion as a mask, which is removed and exhibited as a standalone work. The viewer brings their own perspective to interpret it. As an artistic medium, fashion becomes a metaphor, a means for rethinking, analysis, critique, or irony.

In summary, the role of fashion agents within the sociocultural network is natural and constantly experienced. Their transfer into the art network allows for new expressions and concepts. Ordinary symbols are perceived differently, as if observed from the periphery. What remains in the shadows or is taken for granted can be made important. Clothes and accessories gain autonomy and "voice," establishing a new practice of experiencing fashion. These objects allow us to recognize what is familiar or foreign, identify aspects of reality, and make them tangible. Their agency serves as the inspiration for this artistic research.

5 Susan Sontag, *Atsižadėjime interpretavimo ir kitos esė* (Vilnius: LAPAS, 2024).

Bio

Justė Tarvydė has built a distinguished creative career over the past two decades within leading Lithuanian fashion publications, working as both a fashion editor and stylist with a focus on writing and visual storytelling. Her practice has developed a nuanced understanding of fashion objects — interpreting them across diverse contexts and transforming them into narrative forms. She is an associate professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, where her scholarly interests center on the psychology and sociology of fashion as an expression of human identity. Her doctoral artistic research explores the intersection of art and fashion, text and texture, through the lens of disembodiment.



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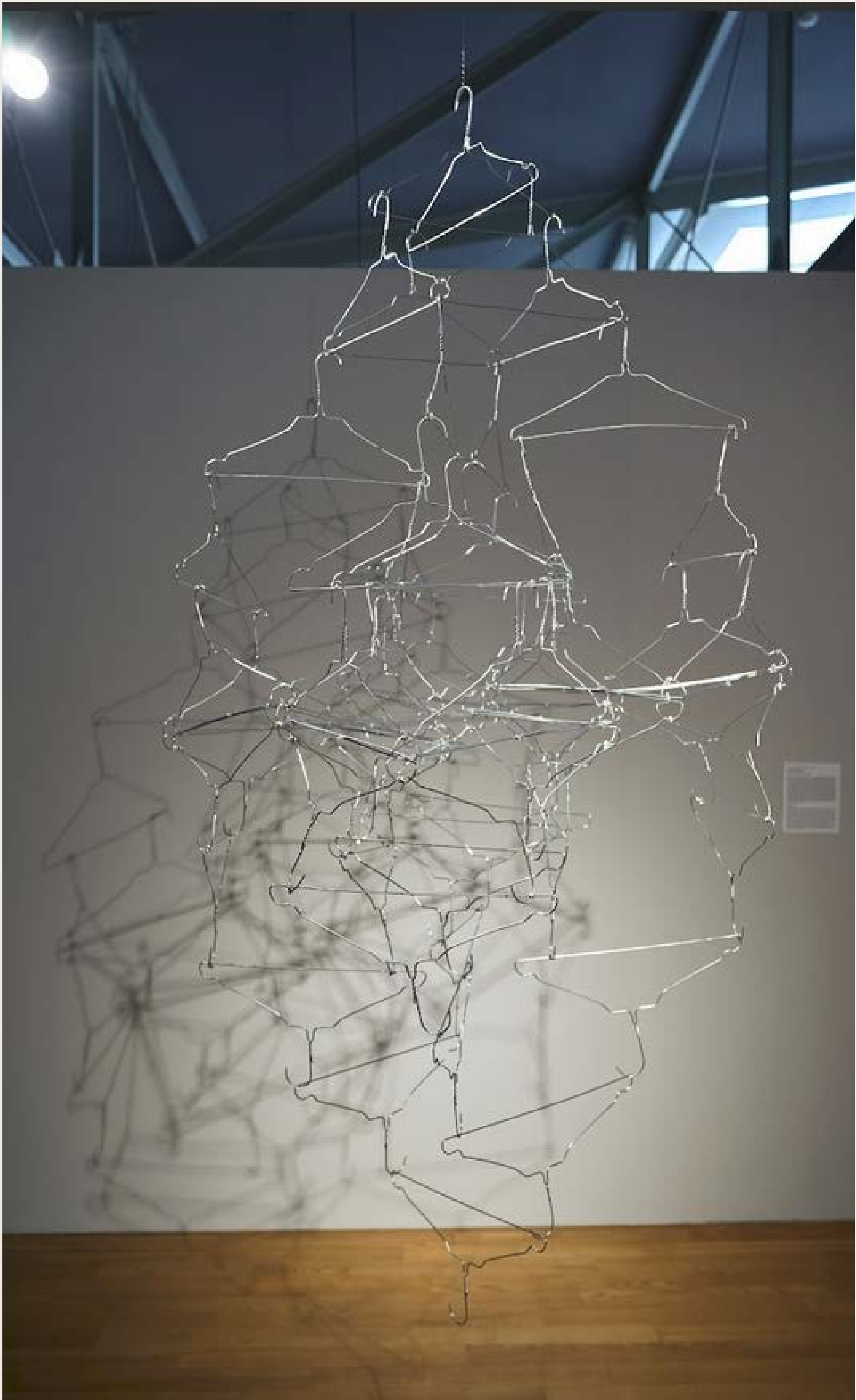
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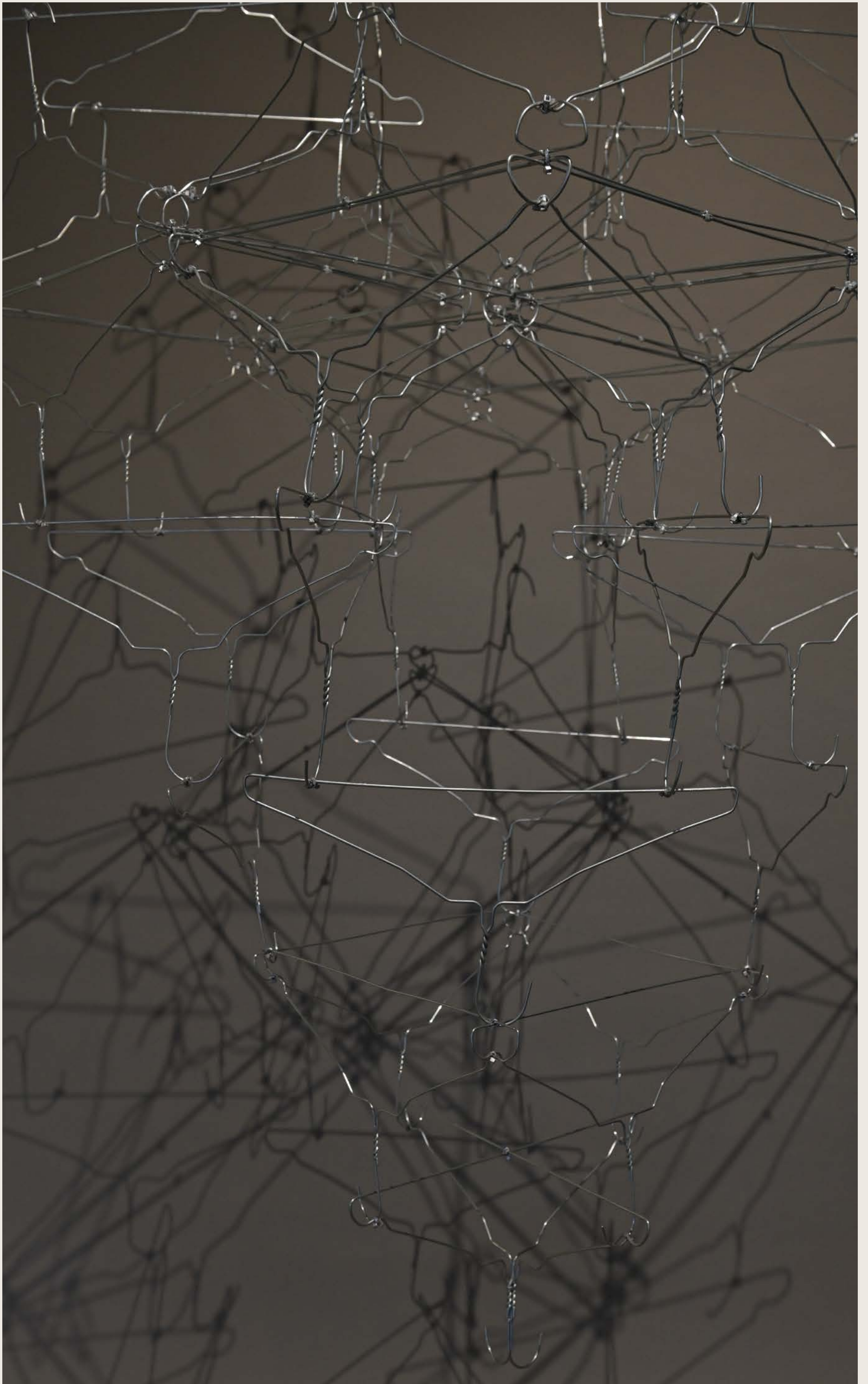
List of illustrations

1. The interlaced structure of metal hangers echoes the tradition of Lithuanian straw gardens, those airborne geometries that, in folklore, embody a cosmological model of the world. Photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė
2. Metal hangers from dry-cleaning services are assembled into a porous sculptural grid that allows symbolic metaphors of fashion and religion to intersect. The hanger, as an abstracted fragment of the human figure, becomes an expression of our relationship with the body. Photography by Renata Maldutienė.
3. Moreover, the intertwined pendants articulate the complex tensions linking fashion and religion, ethical and aesthetic constructions of the body, and the opposing forces of order and freedom. Photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė.









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Bigotry:

double face
of fashion.
Silhouette from
collection
the Signs



The Concept

Key words: Middle Ages, hidden meanings of fashion, symbols, codes, dichotomy.

The inspiration for the *Bigotry* silhouette, part of the *SIGNS* collection, came from an extensive analysis of the relationship between humans and fashion at the level of nonverbal communication. The design process began with an attempt to redefine the concept of symbolism in the context of clothing, taking into account historical sources in the form of studies and iconography. Drawing on the fashion of the late Middle Ages, which was particularly adept at using the language of signs, I sought analogies in contemporary clothing. However, I did not want to delve too deeply into the historical fabric, lest I fall into reconstruction. History, juxtaposed with modern mechanisms, thus became merely a foundation for further work. I drew inspiration in part from period paintings, which capture the details of the garments with photographic accuracy. Nevertheless, the silhouette, as well as the entire collection, is intended to be utilitarian and dedicated to a contemporary audience who may not even notice these historical references. The forms of each product line are based on original designs, clearly referencing classic styles yet grounded in contemporary trends. The design process for the *SIGNS* series began during the pandemic, which redefined numerous concepts, relationships, and mechanisms—both global and personal. This unique moment of suspension and spiritual reevaluation has left its mark on my thinking about fashion. As research has shown, paradoxically, luxury goods suffered the least during the crisis. They became a form of investment, and perhaps also an escape from bad news, forecasts, and prevailing fears. However, for many people, it was a time to pause and reflect on whether fashion makes any sense at all in the face of great problems. With life, health, and the fulfillment of basic needs at stake, isn't ethical fashion, at best, a whim and an awkward luxury? Amid these questions, an internal dialogue raged within me, also audible in public discourse. Issues such as responsible, sustainable, and ethical fashion became more visible, and a parallel to the anti-excess laws repeatedly established in the Middle Ages ceased to be imagined.

Design Process

Through the research, various samples of fabrics, decorations, and embroidery, the collection's principles and initial sketches were developed. The thesis that clothing can signify important, extra-sensory messages became a key point in my design process. I was determined to prove and express the idea that fashion can convey a message, reflect emotional states, invigorate, encourage, and purify. This was especially true in the context of social change and global disruptions, where overproduction, redundancy, and repetition are widely discussed, stigmatizing this industry in the first place. By creating a functional collection, yet not under contract, I allowed myself to maintain a personal and intimate character. Adhering to the principles primarily related to symbol and sign, I decided to introduce elements of meaning on several levels. Immersed in a dystopian atmosphere, I opted for formal constraints and asceticism. The color palette is limited to black, white, gold, and a light, cool brown. The colors here have an obvious symbolic dimension. They reference themes of vanitas, sadness, fear, mourning, and rebellion, more relevant than ever in the postwar reality, but also inner balance, forgiveness, tacit consent, and absolution. The choice of fabrics was also dictated by the idea of designing timeless fashion and followed the principle of reduction. Natural materials predominate: cotton fabric in plain and twill weaves, brushed heavyweight cotton knits, wool suiting fabrics and satin fabrics with elana, heavyweight silk caddy crepe, georgette, and batiste. I also used single-component synthetic fabrics – primarily polyester taffeta, crinkled, memory, and brushed taffeta, nylon, tulle, and gold foiled knit fabric with a distinct texture. Monochromatic fabric combinations, which I find so appealing, allowed me to provoke tension through the appropriate juxtaposition of textures and surfaces. Juxtaposing matte and shiny, smooth and rough, and stiff and soft materials within so-called total looks resulted in a unique form of expression.

Through gathering inspiration, I developed the concept of introducing symbolic motifs in the form of emblems into the collection. After experimenting, I decided that the most suitable technique for achieving black print on a black surface would be relief printing. Among the possible options, I chose flock printing, which appears in the collection as a report or a spot. The use of common contemporary technological solutions clashes with historical materials in the clothing ranges. The motifs woven into the fabrics refer to symbols and signs known in the Middle Ages, but also understood today. Among them are sacred motifs such as crosses, angels, the merciful heart, the crown of thorns, and the eye of the providence; derived from courtly traditions – fleur de lis, daggers, unicorns, as well as lightning bolts, snakes, and tilted crosses. Additionally, inscriptions in Latin and English, written in a Gothic-style font. Simple messages addressing universal issues, combined with color, fabric, and the proximity of other symbols, create an open message whose reception is essentially capacious and based both on competence and the inner, emotional ground it strikes. Another carrier of symbolic content are the forms of clothing themselves and their structural elements, which refer to historical clothing and its associated meanings, but also to contemporary associations related to popular culture. Details such as gloves, extended sleeves protecting the hands, hoods, stripes, and slits evoke associations with specific historical borrowings. Juxtaposed with basic forms, characteristic of mass fashion or those derived from the classics, they provoke reflection on the validity of their use and meaning.

The work aims to highlight the semantic, non-material dimension of fashion. It draws attention to the historical continuity accompanying the need to express affiliation, hierarchy, status, function, ideas, and ultimately emotions and socially significant messages through clothing.

Specific examples of clothing forms that convey tradition and remain virtually intact over the years include folk costumes, uniforms, and the attire of church hierarchs. Linked to their function, they strongly communicate affiliation, but also serve as a unique transmitter of the most important ideas they represent.

Context

Folk costume is closely linked to production, which involves the artisanal production of fabrics and relies on handicraft techniques. A special role of folk costumes is seen in the cultivation of customs and the preservation of skills. Passed down from generation to generation, they guarantee cultural continuity. The forms and colors often carry very specific meanings. Many elements of folk costume are symbolic and informative. The best example in Poland is women's headgear. Wreaths, scarves, and bonnets convey information about age, marital status, and wealth. For example: "The construction of headgear was also subordinated to the above-mentioned principle, with girls' headgear always having to be open at the top, most often taking the form of wreaths, rings, and headbands, while women's, on the contrary, had to be covered – such as bonnets and scarves. Married women wrapped their hair, not braided it, as it was the girls who braided it (...) Married women wore a bonnet, sometimes a bonnet and a scarf, or just a scarf, but properly formed. Appearing bareheaded in public was associated with great shame and resentment for a married woman. A bonnet was an attribute of marriage, a conventionalized sign of the beginning of sexual intercourse. Therefore, unraveling braids, cutting them off, or hiding them under a bonnet, signifies the closing of one stage of life and the opening of another. The decorations of headgear also included information about the length of marital life. In the Zamość region, the bonnets of older married women, The embroidery was exclusively black. On those worn by younger women, the embroidery was also black, but supplemented with small red motifs, and was larger and more ornate."¹ Folk costume possesses a significant characteristic in the context of contemporary fashion. It carries a special emotional charge – it is based on interpersonal relationships and is linked to the stories of specific individuals who created the costumes, passed them down, or passed down traditions. Of course, many uncultivated rituals and the attributes associated with them have died out. Traces of them can be found in museum collections or only on the pages of books or in oral traditions. Today, folk costumes are still visible in public spaces, but usually in the context of ceremonies. Worn by different generations, they convey a common message – pride in one's identity, tradition, and culture.

These mechanisms are also visible in strictly religious spaces. Groups of believers use their clothing to emphasize their place within a religious group. In this context, the attire of spiritual guides, priests, and monks takes center stage. Marcin Pauk writes about this identity, which constitutes a person, in his publication *Habitus facit hominem*. He gives a vivid example taken from a text by Cezary of Heisterbach: "(...) A Cistercian monk who took off his habit because

¹ Uniwersytet Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie, "Znakowy charakter kobiecych nakryć głowy [The Symbolic Nature of Women's Head Coverings]," accessed March 29, 2023, <https://cyfrowaetnografia.pl/items/browse?collection=7&output=omeka-xml>.

of the heat and died while working, clad only in a scapular, is not admitted to paradise by St. Benedict. When the deceased states that he is a Cistercian, the saint reacts with a vehement denial and the question: *Nequaquam, si monachum es, ubi est habituus tuus?* The deceased returns to earthly life for a moment, only to be able to disguise himself for another journey to the afterlife, in accordance with his monastic profession. Therefore – to paraphrase a well-known medieval saying – it is the habit rather than the profession that makes the monk!"² The forms of habit in European-Christian culture have evolved over the centuries, moving from unification through complete rejection to the establishment of principles of cut and character. "Synodal resolutions and decrees of the Holy See in subsequent centuries specified the rules for wearing clerical vestments, thus significantly influencing their shape and cut. According to these guidelines, a clerical garment was to cover the entire body, be dark in color, and could not have an elaborate cut (e.g., wide, decorative sleeves)."³ In principle, this garment remains unaffected by fashion and rapid changes to this day; it is relatively modest, in a narrow palette of achromatic, usually dark colors. Monastic robes have additional types of forms marked by meaning. These include, for example, hoods that conceal the face as a sign of penance. The cords that gird monks as a symbol of devotion and control over their bodies and senses. The cloaks, protecting them from the outside world and its temptations. The veil, a symbol of marriage to God, but also of modesty, separation from sexuality, and external judgment. The diversity of monastic robes is immense, and it would be impossible to list the individual differences and forms here. What unites the clerical attire, formally and symbolically, is simplicity, asceticism, and unification. The very adoption of the religious robes is a part of the transition to a new state and an expression of obedience and devotion. We are not, of course, referring to the liturgical vestments of the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, which have a different function and symbolism and, despite their simple design, are often lavish.

The research preceding the collection's creation also explored the symbolic role of colors in clothing, their function in expressing personal and collective identity, and many other signs. However, codes related to spirituality, tradition, and religion, as the most constant and enduring for hundreds of years in unchanged form, are most fascinating in the context of contemporary, dynamically evolving fashion in the age of materialism.

² Lucyna Rotter and Dariusz Pawelec, *Co można opowiedzieć strojem: semantyka strojów zakonnych* [What Can Be Told by Clothing: The Semantics of Religious Habits] (Kraków: Avalon, 2021), 111.

³ Ewa Wólkiewicz, Monika Saczyńska, and Marcin Pauk, eds., *Habitus facit hominem. Społeczne funkcje ubioru w średniowieczu i w epoce nowożytnej* [*Habitus Makes the Man: The Social Functions of Clothing in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*] (Warszawa: Niemiecki Instytut Historyczny w Warszawie; Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, 2016), 9–10.

Having posed a series of questions regarding the relationship between humans and clothing as a form of nonverbal communication, I designed silhouettes that conveyed specific messages I encoded. Giving them a referential function meant that, beyond what they are and what they mean in themselves, they could become signposts to further, usually immaterial, meanings. An inherent characteristic of a symbol is its ambiguity and multifaceted nature, dependent also on the temporal, historical, geographical, cultural, and intellectual context. Symbolic content, recorded in any visual form, thus becomes a carrier of half the information. The missing part is the recipient, who, depending on their cognitive competence, will assign meaning to the given content. It can be assumed that the recipient's sufficient competence in interacting with a symbol is nothing more than their education, intelligence, but also such soft traits as intuition, the ability to associate, and aesthetic sensitivity, which often allow for free interpretation of programmed meanings without specialist knowledge in a given area.

BIGOTRY silhouette consists of a shirt, undershirt, bonnet, baseball cap, and skirt. The headdress is made of bonded, thick cotton with a denim weave, embroidered with densely gathered, torn strips of silk—crepe, batiste, and chiffon. As in weaving, the pieces of fabric create a soft structure, but are not strung on the warp, but rather stitched onto the fabric's surface. As a form of clothing, the bonnet refers to common medieval hoods, coifs, and cruselers, and the gathered strips serve as narrow ruffles. The headgear itself, traditionally associated with folklore and religion, was obligatory for married women and widows, signifying their status or age. The bonnet in the collection is worn over a peaked cap, a completely contemporary design, suggesting the dichotomy of the silhouette in question. The shirt is open at the back, closed at the front, and conservative. It has a stand-up collar sewn to the neckline, so the front and back are identical. The shirt's sleeves are voluminous and gathered, forming a cape that falls along the arms. The back of the shirt is slit and fastened. It is cut in an arc and shorter than the front, revealing the back. Underneath the shirt is a transparent top made of flesh-colored tulle mesh. The undershirt is printed with flock symbols. The bottom of the silhouette is a pencil skirt made of grosgrain fabric, the front of which is adorned with a report-style print in the form of densely arranged equal-armed crosses. The same motif appears on the back of the silhouette, on a fragment of a top peeking out from under a short shirt. The regular inscription of symbols is interrupted by several diagonally arranged crosses, forming an x. The equal-armed cross is the symbol most deeply rooted in Christian European culture. It evokes the concepts of suffering, redemption, and eternity. It is a sign of devotion, humility, and victory over evil. At the same time, through overuse, inappropriate placement, and so on, its meaning can easily be devalued. Rotated 45 degrees, it becomes a meaningless X or a mathematical symbol denoting multiplication. Classical forms, covering the body, exaggeratedly built up at the front while revealing it in places at the back, headgear combining features of modern and old-fashioned clothing, prints with religious and secular connotations, and their disrupted and meaning-

altering rhythm—all this symbolizes the dual nature of man, the schizophrenia of moral attitudes, duplicity, superficial prudery, and piety. It also describes the relationship of some contemporary consumers with fashion, as being overly focused on what is superficial and ostentatious, often with a lack of reflection on important issues related to it, which are relevant in the context of the challenges of modern times.

Bio

Maria Wiatrowska is a fashion designer and researcher and the head of the Fashion Institute at the Strzemiński Academy of Art in Łódź. Her artistic research focuses on the meanings and symbolism of fashion and on the relationship between clothing and artistic form. In 2023, she defended her PhD based on the collection SIGNS, in which she examined signs encoded in clothing and their continuity in women's fashion in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present. She is a winner of the "Golden Thread" competition in the prêt-à-porter category and has created numerous original collections presented at exhibitions and fashion events. Wiatrowska has also founded her own brand, dedicated to the design of evening wear.

Bibliography

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Wótkiewicz, Ewa, Monika Saczyńska, and Marcin Pauk, eds. *Habitus facit hominem. Społeczne funkcje ubioru w średniowieczu i w epoce nowożytnej* [*Habitus Makes the Man: The Social Functions of Clothing in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*]. Warszawa: Niemiecki Instytut Historyczny w Warszawie; Instytut Archeologii i Etnologii PAN, 2016.

List of Illustrations

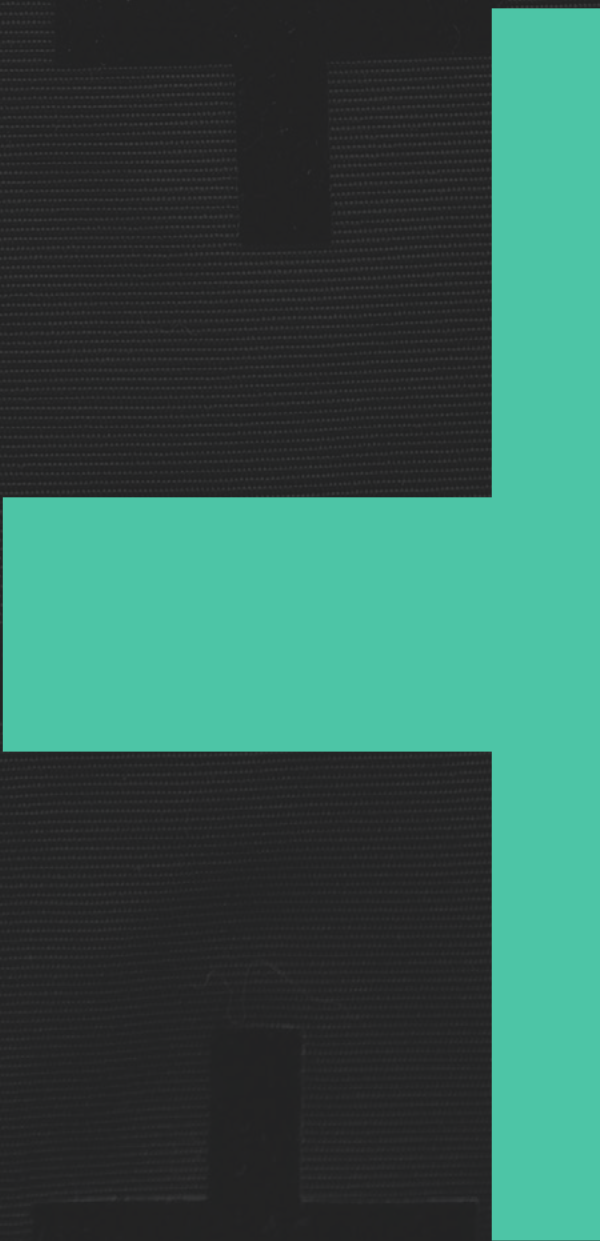
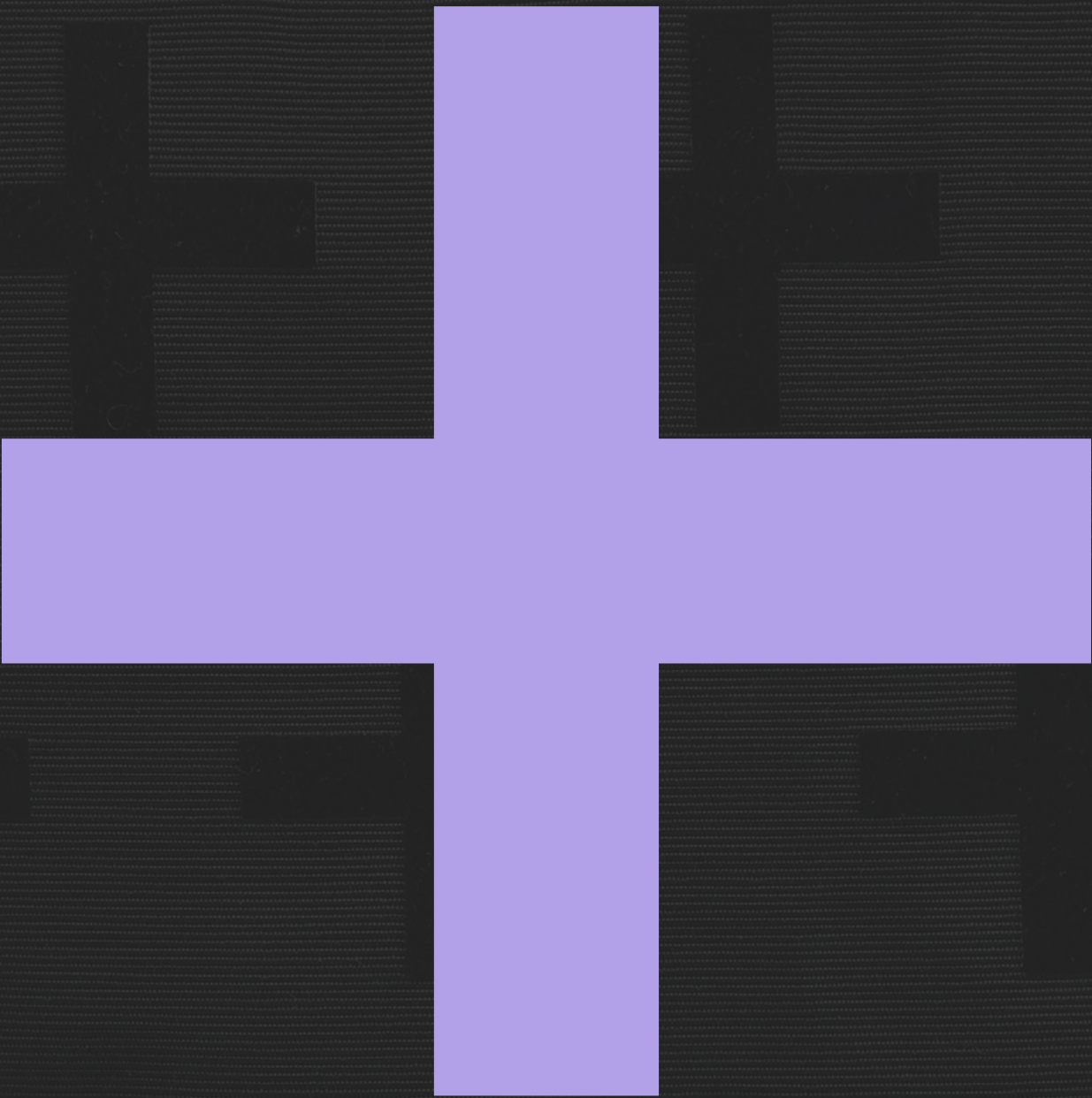
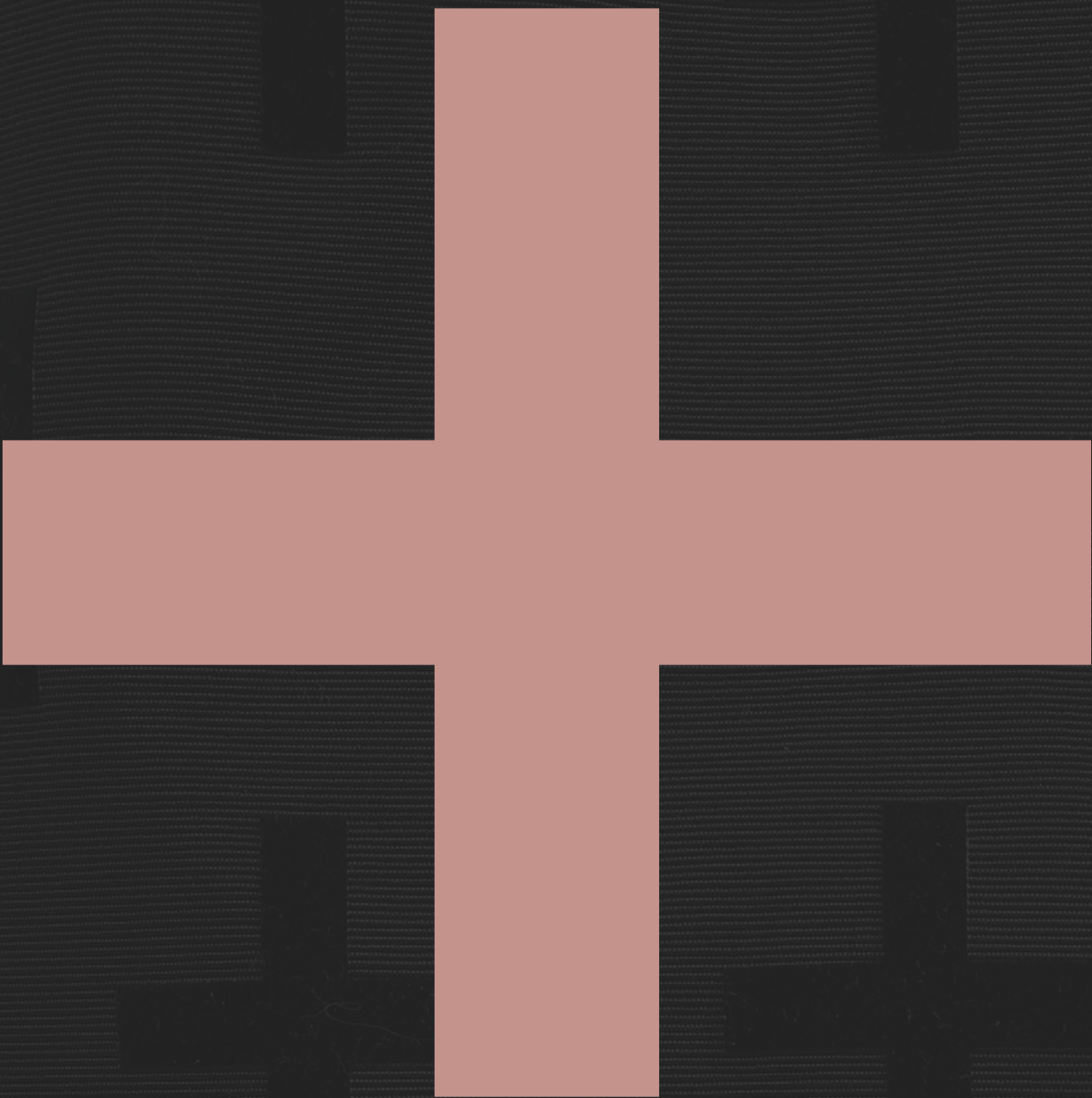
- 1 *Bigotry*, silhouette front, project author Maria Wiatrowska, photography by Monika Łuczak.
- 2 *Bigotry*, fragment, project author Maria Wiatrowska, photography by Monika Łuczak.
- 3 *Bigotry*, silhouette back, project author Maria Wiatrowska, photography by Monika Łuczak.
- 4 *Bigotry*, detail, project author Maria Wiatrowska, photography by Vaiva Abromaitytė,













List of project exhibitions

Costume and Contemplation

The Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz
2022.11.24—2023.01.30

Annotation

This exhibition is the first in a cycle to feature works by international fashion designers of different generations, who are all connected with Vilnius Academy of Arts. Some of the authors have many years of experience in academic life and in the fashion industry. The others are just starting teaching careers and developing their own fashion brands.

All the design objects presented are both *costume* and *contemplation*. The authors reflect on the topics they are interested in: socio-cultural, historical and religious. They are discussing or arguing with the viewer, exploring the world and existence, thus trying in small steps to make their daily lives meaningful and to get closer to the truth they are looking for.

Curators

Renata Maldutienė

Agnetė Voverė

Collaborator

Michał Szulc

Visual consultant

Magdalena Gonera

Fashion designers featured in exhibition

Jolanta Talaikytė, Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė, Alevtina Ščepanova & Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė, Agnė Kuzmickaitė-Prūsaitienė, Justina Semčenkaitė, Rytis Beiga, Renata Maldutienė, Vidmina Stasiulytė, Sonja Šterman.

Organisers

Vilnius Academy of Arts

The Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz

Fashion Design institute

Central Museum of textiles

Partner

Lodz Young Fashion

Costume and Contemplation on Religion

Annotation

The exhibition *Costume & Contemplation On Religion* is the second installment in the *Costume & Contemplation* research cycle, showcasing the works of fashion design researchers and educators from Lithuania and abroad.

The exhibition explores the individual's relationship with the transcendent reality. Through an engaging narrative, it intertwines stories, events, and religious experiences that have shaped the worldviews and creative practices of fashion designers. Rather than redefining religion as an essential pillar of life, the exhibition seeks to reveal the diversity of faith experiences each artist carries within.

The fashion objects created specifically for this exhibition reflect the personal relationship between *sacrum* and *profanum*, embodying experiences that often elude verbal expression. Each piece is accompanied by texts that highlight the focus of the creators' research.

First Exhibition—

The Central Museum of Textiles in Lodz
2024.03.12—2024.04.14

Curators

Renata Maldutienė

Agnetė Voverė

Michał Szulc

Visual consultant

Magdalena Gonera

Exhibiting Artists

Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, Alevtina Ščepanova ir Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė,
Jolanta Talaikytė, Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė, Renata Maldutienė, Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė,
Justė Tarvydienė, Justina Semčenkaitė, Anna Kuźmitowicz,
Sylwia Romecka-Dymek, Dorota Sak, Dorota Salska,
Magdalena Samborska, Sonja Šterman, Michał Szulc,
Maria Wiatrowska, Katarzyna Wróblewska,
Adrianna Grudzińska-Pham.

Organizers

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Central Museum of Textiles

The Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz

Fashion Design Institute

Curators

Michał Szulc

Renata Maldutienė

Agnetė Voverė

Architect

Ūla Žebrauskaitė-Malinauskė

Designers

Rusnė Šimulynaitė,

Michał Szulc

Exhibiting Artists

Evelina Dragūnienė & Edita Tamošiūnienė, Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, Renata Maldutienė, Justė Kubilinskaitė-Tarvydienė, Anna Kuźmitowicz, Rūta Kvaščevičiūtė-Mikalauskė, Dorota Sak, Justina Semčenkaitė, Michał Szulc, Alevtina Ščepanova & Edita Sabockytė-Skudienė, Ieva Šlaičiūnaitė, Sonja Šterman, Jolanta Talaikytė, Maria Wiatrowska.

Organizer

Vilnius Academy of Arts

Partners

Strzeminski Academy of Art in Lodz.

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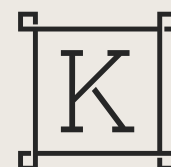
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of Arts



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